

Richard Bacon

Richard Bacon is Conservative MP for South Norfolk



A week in politics

The Chinese way is the way to go for future prosperity

Just 30 years ago China was an under-developed country based largely on subsistence agriculture. It is now the world's largest trading power, its largest manufacturer, its largest energy consumer, and by far the world's largest holder of foreign exchange reserves. Measured by revenue, three of the world's top 10 companies are Chinese. On any view, China is already becoming one of the most important factors of the 21st century.

What are we to make of all this? How will it affect our future and that of our children? What will happen to our jobs, our lives and our security? Can one just ignore China? What are small and medium-sized manufacturers in East Anglia to make of all this? Is China a threat or an opportunity? I thought I needed to know more.

Led by Richard Graham, the MP for Gloucester and an old China hand who speaks fluently in Mandarin, I joined a small group of parliamentarians bound for Shanghai for three days packed with exciting meetings and visits.

Perhaps the most remarkable impression is the first one. The new tower blocks of Shanghai are like the Manhattan skyline on steroids. We visited the offices of Arup, a British engineering consultancy responsible for many of the world's most iconic buildings. Arup showed us two photographs of the Shanghai skyline, 30 years ago and today, which show the incredible transformation in just one generation.

I will not quickly forget our visit to a British-run solar cell factory that was more reminiscent of the set from a James Bond movie than a traditional factory.

Equally memorable was the opening of the new business school at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, a Sino-British joint venture university in Suzhou, 50 miles from Shanghai, where a presentation included the fact, startling to us, that Suzhou is "a small city" of 12 million people.

We held a debate with Chinese students at the university on the motion that This House believes Creativity is More Important than Diligence.

The parliamentarians took opposing positions alongside Chinese students on each side of the debate. The Chinese demonstrated the noble art of



■ The sky seems to be the limit for China - its manufacturing and trading is leading the world.



hard work and thorough preparation, showing exceptional diligence.

We demonstrated the Western skill of "winging it", with some colleagues showing remarkable creativity, especially my colleague Ian Austin, who learned only 15 minutes beforehand that he was speaking for the opposite side of the debate to the one which he had prepared. The debate concluded with the hard truth that real success requires large amounts of both Creativity and Diligence.

We visited a social media company called CIC which helps western companies navigate the immensely complex web of China online, which includes some 600 million internet users, 85 per cent

of whom regularly use social media to tell each other what they think of the products and services they are buying as modern consumers.

We also met a group of British entrepreneurs in Shanghai engaged in everything from castings and shipping to selling British luxury goods and engineering pumps.

One entrepreneur, William Vanbergen, started by selling British education to affluent Chinese 10 years ago and is now building his second high school in China. He is still only 31 years old.

Two facts stand out. The first is the sheer scale of activity. I met one Chinese entrepreneur whose factory produces 15 per cent of the world's vacuum cleaners.

Among his 8,000 employees are 500 designers who come up with 100 new designs every year. Some of the best known Western vacuum cleaner brands visit his plant each year, competing for the chance to badge up his latest designs to sell in Western markets. He was an admirer of two British success stories, the Dyson and the Henry vacuum cleaners, and saw them as important competitors.

The second fact is that there is more to come. Much more. The Chinese are planning nine

"small" cities like Suzhou in the years ahead, each with a population 50 per cent larger than London. There are cities of 30 million that are considered "second tier" and which are largely unknown in the West.

Many smaller firms may be reluctant to venture into this vast market. And certainly, those thinking of entering it should look hard before doing so. Some potential first-time exporters may consider there are easier export options to tackle first, for example a mature English-speaking market such as Australia.

The streets of China are not paved with gold. Businesses should expect years of hard work and persistence before making a serious breakthrough. But for the right companies with the right products, the opportunities are enormous. Perhaps the most salutary advice came from a member of the local British Chamber of Commerce who told us: "We say to our visitors: 'Don't worry about finding your competitor manufacturers in China. They will find you.'"

Ignoring China is not an option.

■ For more information, contact the China-Britain Business Council www.cbbc.org.uk Telephone 0207 802 2000

Lynne Mortimer



We're not ones to revolt - but we will think about signing a petition

We are not a nation given to revolution. Other countries may make a big fuss but our British reserve tends to keep us off the streets.

A well-crafted letter to the editor usually suffices.

We have not stormed the Tower of London - not for ages, anyway.

Last week's worldwide demonstration against austerity cuts was attended by "hundreds" in London, I read. There were three arrests.

There have been times when British people take to the streets in huge numbers.

The 2003 demo against war in Iraq, for example, when (arguably) a million people marched through London.

No barricades were manned and people took flasks of coffee and chatted.

In the light of soaring fuel prices, pay-day loans at exorbitant rates of interest, the nagging feeling that a lot of rich people are paying less tax than people on average wages, and the sense that public consultations are mere box-ticking exercises, you might think there would be dark mutterings in corner coffee shops.

But it's not really happening.

Well, not in the Costa up the road, anyhow. Everyone seems to be thoroughly fed up but more with a gloomy sense of inevitability than revolutionary stirrings.

Mass eruptions of pent-up fury are not usually effective anyway.

They can lead to violence, and you can end up with something worse than when you started.

We are a people that takes stock before it acts. The process is considered.

First, there is the initial assessment of a seeming injustice.

What are the facts?

Then we discuss it to check we are not alone in our view.

We listen to what other people say. Only then, after the requisite two-week cooling-off period which confirms we have not been over-reacting, do we recourse to strong action.

A letter to your MP may follow. I have tried this on one occasion (no current MPs were involved) and found myself more incensed by the anodyne reply than I ever was by the original reason for writing.

In recent times the government e-petition has become a useful outlet for frustration. Trending at the moment are: "Do not privatise the Probation Service" with (at time of ranting) more than 100 signatures in the last hour.

Not trending so fiercely is "Heat our roads to avoid snow chaos" with a total, as I write, of three petitioners.

But if you want your opinion counted, you might like to flex your democratic muscle and sign an e-petition.

I just did and feel a whole lot better. Power to the people.