Michael Kirby was Chairman of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry into Human Rights in North Korea that reported in 2014. As the club meeting was just before the historic summit meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un, Mr Kirby's talk covered the subject of human rights in North Korea. He said that transcripts of the many interviews that formed the basis of the UN report are on the UN website and that they all had to be conducted outside North Korea (as access to the country was denied). However, because of the tens of thousands of refugees from North Korea, it was easy to find people who wanted to give evidence. He also said that any access to the country is completely controlled by the regime, so working with people who have fled is the only available methodology to review the regime and its human rights record.

Mr Kirby said that the human rights violations under the UN code found in North Korea were damming and alarming. The report drew overwhelming support in the UN Human Rights Council, which is usually bitterly divided along geopolitical lines. Likewise, in the General Assembly, which was shocked by the findings of multiple crimes against humanity. There are millions of people starving in North Korea and more than 120,000 in detention camps to which access is denied. Thousands of people are executed publicly as enemies of the regime.

Whilst Mr Kirby welcomed the news of the historic meeting between Kim Jong-un and President Trump he emphasised that he was not an expert on peace and his interest was specifically on human rights. He stated that human rights issues in North Korea should be on the table for discussion at the meeting as well as the peace initiatives and nuclear weapons reduction, but also expressed fears that this might not be so. In his view excluding human rights issues from discussion would be most unsatisfactory in view of the extraordinary violations that have occurred in the country. He said that he was looking forward to hearing the outcomes from the meeting saying that it is very much “watch this space” until the meeting is concluded. He also said that he would look forward to giving an update on the situation in North Korea in the future.

John Rawson