

Aamer Anwar- RECTOR SPEECH ON THE 19TH APRIL AT BUTE HALL

Good Evening Ladies and gentleman, Chancellor, Your Lordship, Members of the Senate, Sabbaticals, Consul General, distinguished guests, mum, dad, my sister Saiqa, my nieces Raabiah and Shairah and my children Qais and Lylah, and above all the Students of the University of Glasgow

Always wanted to do that!

When I came to this University in October 1986, neither I nor my family could ever have predicted the journey my life has taken and there certainly has been no room for dull moments.

It is a great honour to be chosen as your rector and a great responsibility. So when I had to consider who to invite today, my list grew by the hour.

As I looked back over three decades, I thought of the many of activists who have stood by my side, of all of those who have been in the front line fighting for justice and equality.

I thought of all the men and women who have given me strength. inspiration and optimism, some of whom are sadly no longer with us, but many of you here today have in some way played a pivotal role in my life, and I realised that i have never really had the opportunity of thanking you.

Some of you gave me friendship, some of you have wiped my tears in my darkest hours, others have motivated and politicised me, and trade unionists taught me the meaning of solidarity.

I can't resist mentioning my beloved friends the Sub Club who showed me music can change the world because it can change people.

Whilst others have offered stern advice and at times have been a calming influence when needed.

My lecturers both at this University and Strathclyde Law School gave me the encouragement I needed to persevere.

There are those who have stood shoulder to shoulder through campaigns when the establishment lined up to silence us.

Family's like the Chhokars who in the midst of grief for the love of a murdered son Surjit Singh Chhokar, never gave up fighting for 17 long years.

The Chhokar family symbolised for me, more than anyone I have met in my lifetime - what justice should be about, not the vanity of wigs and gowns, or a gentleman's club, but a humble family who demanded 'justice as a right and not a privilege.'

And of course there are those in our justice system whom I might once have thought of as the enemy and probably vice versa, but with time a grudging mutual respect was followed by friendship which developed into a unity of purpose in achieving justice.

To all of you I am truly grateful.

It has been a difficult task to decide what to say, normally I am given a brief and there is always a chair trying to shut me up. Today I have none of that.

For guidance I thought I would have a look at those who have been past Rectors for what they have said. The first thing I noticed was that the title traditionally was Lord Rector. However you will be pleased to know that despite my best efforts to resurrect that title, I will be referred to as the Rector.

As for the Rectors before me; there have been Prime Ministers (including Sir Robert Peel, Benjamin Disraeli, and Stanley Baldwin), High Court Judges, Lord Chancellors and even an EastEnders's actor who played Grant Mitchell.

But truly humbling is to think that at the height of apartheid in 1962 students elected as Rector the President of the African National Congress Albert Luthuli - the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He banned by the S. African regime from travelling to Glasgow and the Luthuli Scholarship fund was set up by the Student Representative Council to enable a black South African Students to study at Glasgow University.

During my time at University, Pat Kane was my Rector - whose help I have never forgotten, he reminded me that I was the first student through his door demanding help for the dental students, as we began a campaign to expose alleged racism at the Glasgow Dental School, which ultimately led to anonymous marking being introduced in all faculties.

Since then there have been others such as Mordechai Vanunu a Prisoner of Conscience who spoke out against Israel's Weapons of Mass Destruction and of course my predecessor Edward Snowden the Whistle-blower on mass surveillance.

But for me the greatest Rectorial address ever given was by the late Jimmy Reid in 1971 he was one of the Trade Union Leaders of the famous "work-in" at the shipyards belonging to

the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Consortium, when workers refused to accept the liquidation of the company and mass redundancies and instead continued to work.

The speech that Jimmy made in this hall, in these robes at this very spot was described by the *New York Times* as the greatest since Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address.

He told the students to reject individualism and greed, and remember their common humanity and to reject the rat race and so I take my inspiration today from the great late Jimmy Reid.

I was elected on a manifesto of promising to be an active Working Rector and I want to start by thanking my team of students who have worked night and day to help deliver this result. I was inspired by the thousands of students that I met in the three weeks of campaigning.

I now want to tell you a little of how I come to stand here.

My mother Nargis, my father Anwar came to this country in 1966, unusually in comparison to many immigrants in their time my parents came from a privileged background in Pakistan, so the discrimination, exclusion and segregation they faced came as a shock.

They were forced to do the jobs that the local community did not wish to do, and like many immigrants they shed blood, sweat and tears to build a future here.

My father worked on the buses in Liverpool and my mother began work as a secretary once both my sister and I began school.

My parents' high expectations for me and my sister Saiqa coupled with love was their greatest gift. Like so many immigrants all their hope was invested in their children, my sister Saiqa was always the brainy one and the one who went to Cambridge, she always got a hard time from me but my sister Saiqa has remained my rock through many difficult years.

Of course I was the black sheep, the words on school reports always were 'he has potential' whilst my sister got all the A stars.

My parents sacrificed so much and I confess that over the years I have put them through much pain and worry and I know I would be nothing without them.

To the students here today my advice is never be too ashamed to tell your parents you love them.

Every generation of immigrants have always enriched and strengthened our way of life.

Prior to 9/11 my parents would have been seen as good hardworking and law abiding Muslims, but sadly today immigrants, Muslims and minorities are devalued and portrayed as threatening a 'civilised' way of life.

Let me make it clear as a Muslim I am repulsed and angry at the barbaric nature of each cowardly attack carried out in the name of Islam whether it be in Paris, Brussels, London or Karachi.

But I do not believe my community has to apologise for the actions of a handful of maniacs. Over 15 years after 9/11 there is a failure to understand that our children and families live and work in the same communities, we walk, travel and fly on the same transport as others and are our loved ones are just as likely to be the target of terrorist attacks.

Today even if the victims of war and famine manage to get to that word 'Great Britain', they will face hunger and homelessness, a '*toxic combination of inhumane laws and public ignorance and hostility*' has bred despair, contempt and fear.

Following Brexit and Donald Trump's victory the stakes have never been higher, across Europe mainstream political leaders are engaging with ideas once relegated to the margins of fascism.

You as students cannot afford to be complacent, you are not locked away in some ivory tower, you live and work in the community and what you do can make a difference to society and to the world.

When I came to University in 1986 let me confess I was a pampered mummy's boy, with right wing and bigoted views, brought by a very strict disciplinarian father who was a Tory.

But by the time I left University my mind had been blown away. You can only imagine the horror of my father an admirer of Margaret Thatcher, when I returned home in my third year at University to tell him that the revolution was coming and I asked if he wanted to buy a copy of socialist worker. I won't tell you what he said next before such eminent company.

I count my years at University from 1986 to 1994 as some of the best years of my life, but more importantly it changed the entire course of my life. Glasgow gave me more than just an education, it is where I made friendships that have lasted a lifetime, it broke down my religious and cultural barriers, I learned about politics not through books but through activism and solidarity.

I am truly grateful that I now have an opportunity to give something back to my University. Students for far too long have suffered the brunt of cuts, insecurity of accommodation, spiralling debt and I intend to fight for all the pledges I have made.

Whilst I welcome the billion pounds building project that will take this University into the 21st century, I sound a very loud note of caution, such buildings must never be at the expense of students or staff.

It is the students and staff that gave this University its heart and soul, its reputation and history.

Universities in England have fallen for the trap set by successive governments for increased 'marketization of education'.

When managers want to make university education more competitive, they will open the doors for private companies as higher education providers, it will lead to higher tuition fees, asset stripping and an assault on pay and conditions.

With the onset of Brexit I fully accept our University face difficult times ahead but we should always know that when the managers & financiers take control and are allowed to treat education as a business, the whole 'raison d'etre becomes cash flow and not the students'.

Today Student Unions such as the GUU and GMU, or GUSA and the SRC are forced to quantify and justify their existence whilst dealing with year on year cuts, and yes quite rightly they are told to up their game, but how do you put a figure on tearing down political, cultural and religious barriers.

The whole object of university must be to equip and educate people for life, not solely for work or a profession.

It is clear that the student support is suffering as money is diverted elsewhere. The need for mental health provision has rocketed over 5 years by 50%, it is unacceptable that any student whose life is spiralling out of control, should be told to wait 6- 8 weeks for an appointment.

The fact that students have taken their own lives is a tragedy which this University must find the resources and the heart to address. No student should ever be left to suffer in silence.

As for asset stripping, it has led to overseas students being targeted by multinationals that buy up huge tracts of land across this City, build housing blocks, aggressively target foreign students and then charge above the market rate for rents to live in accommodation segregated along race lines.

Both the students Unions, the University and the SRC must work in partnership with the Scottish Government and the City Council to use any means necessary to stop this abuse.

Both the Scottish Government and the Local Council must use all its powers and implement the legislation passed in Parliament to protect students and local from rocketing rents & unscrupulous landlords in the West End.

Today our very survival depends on our ability to change and of course it can be easy to despair, to be made to feel that a like on facebook or a retweet is the most we can do, but we can do so much more.

If there is one message I want the students to take home and that is never be afraid to raise your voice for the truth.

The pictures of the body of three year old Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Mediterranean beach seems a very long time ago, when a sea of humanity swept across Europe.

But then the murderous Paris attacks took place which fuelled the march of the far-right.

Thousands of refugees are trapped today as politicians play with their lives. As a deadly winter swept across Europe, men and women fleeing from war, ISIS and poverty froze to death as they crossed the mountains into Europe.

Lorries abandoned in Germany were found with men women and children on the verge of death suffering from hypothermia.

As we bomb Syria with hundred of millions of dollars worth of cruise missiles to save the children, there are many Aylan Kurdis who still continue to die in our waters or even if they manage to reach our shores.

Across Europe there are over 11 million empty homes more than enough to house double the number forced to sleep rough on our streets.

Last month a 28 year old man Martin Bloomer was found dead sleeping on Argyle Street, outside TJ Hughes.

In Glasgow, the caring City, there can be no excuse in allowing people to sleep rough in sub-zero temperatures.

We are all guilty at some time of walking past young people like Martin without even a second glance.

As we prepare for yet another general election we will see the 'rats race' to the gutter as the Tories attack immigration, with greater demands for a brutal regime of border fences, detention centres and deportations empowering the racists, from the fascists of Marie Le Pen to the boot boys of Britain first or the BNP in blazers of UKIP.

Westminster operates a barbaric system that allows for little hope, scapegoating the weakest, no one should underestimate the fight on our hands.

Nor should we believe who are in despair and believe we have already lost, there can never be a compromise on basic humanity.

You cannot defeat a racist misogynist like Donald Trump by serenading him with a state banquet, nor can we absolve our own politicians who are knee deep in the blood of thousands of Africans and Asian drowned by Europe's border controls, whilst they serenade dictators for more arms sales.

Decades of individualism and state sponsored selfishness has made the UK one of the most unequal countries in the Western world and many young people feel they have no future.

Where we have the disabled asked by DWP staff why they haven't killed themselves or some Government Minister who choses to think up the 'rape clause'.

Food banks are used by half a million people who can't afford food in a country in which the richest 10% are now 100 times better off than the poorest.

As for human rights when did it become a dirty word?

We have a UK Government hell bent on tearing up the human rights act as though the job is done but one only needs to switch on the news to see that civil wars, genocide, racism, misogyny, homophobia, starvation and torture is still the norm.

The UN says that 30,000 children die every day of preventable disease across the world.

In the last ten years 13 million children were killed worldwide by diarrhoea, which costs just a few pence to treat. That is more than all the people killed in armed conflict since the Second World War. We know how to prevent these deaths.

The US spent \$800 billion on war in Iraq and Afghanistan. That was enough to wipe out the entire debt of the world's poorest 54 countries.

It is over 70 years since the end of the Second World War when the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s embarked on the mass slaughter of Jews, Roma people, disabled and homosexuals. The Nazis called them "sub-humans".

Alongside communists and trade unionists, over six million Jews were all slaughtered in the extermination camps in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, to name just a few.

The pictures of emaciated corpses warns us of what happens when we look the other way, yet once more we see the rise of fascism across Europe.

Muslims, have replaced Jews as a focus of hatred, but it is a very short step to another group becoming the next targets, be they Roma Gypsies, Gays, Jews or disabled people.

Their message has not changed; there is a scapegoat to blame for your problems. No jobs to be had? Blame the immigrants for taking them all. No houses? Blame the asylum seekers. These are same dangerous ideas which led to the 'gas chambers'.

We have no alternative but to fight, we can falter, we can stumble, but we cannot afford to fail.

Over the years as a lawyer, perhaps not so often now I was told by my peers and elders that there is no point, you cannot fight the system,

but all the things we take for granted in this country, the right to vote, equality, the right to be gay, freedom of religion, freedom from slavery all these were once considered impossible dreams.

Someone at some time decided they had to fight back, and whether it took a year, ten years or hundreds of years and in the end they won. There are still many many battles to be won

I want to finish with a memory I have of 25 years ago, when I was a student at Glasgow University. On November 5th 1991, we occupied the Principals Office a few minutes away from here. Something I used to do quite often at the time.

All the University's and colleges were to march the following day against student loans. Several of us went out onto the edge of Campus and were sticking up posters in Ashton Lane, whilst two people kept watch for the police.

Under usual circumstances Police Officers would confiscate your posters or you would you be fined £25 under Environmental Protection Act.

Whilst I stuck up the posters of Michael Forsythe who was the Secretary of State, someone shouted police so we ran.

I was chased behind Ashton Lane where all the beers gardens are today and at the time there was just grass and concrete.

I knew that if I made it to the QM I would be safe but didn't want to lose my posters. I was grabbed from behind and I shouted alright I've stopped. My first thought was my mum, whom I phoned every night, the next thing that happened was that my head was pulled back and my face smashed off the concrete. My teeth crumbled and my head was pulled back again and smashed and I passed out.

When I came round I was being dragged back into the lane. I looked up to see a police man and police woman whom I recognised from being at the occupation.

I could not feel anything in the top row of my mouth except blood where my teeth once were. I passed out again and when I came round I was terrified.

I remember through the screaming and the tears asking the question why. I was told "*this is what happens to black boys with big mouths*" and I was kicked in the face and the stomach.

Eventually the police officers panicked when some students and passers by shouted at them and an ambulance was called and I was dumped in the hospital by them, and they left as the hospital had filled up with lecturers and students as word spread about what had happened to me.

I had three teeth smashed out, I was bruised, unable to walk for a week, and ate pulverised food through a straw, suffered from nightmares for years after and panic attacks

In the four years that followed I became a fulltime campaigner, I became the epitome of an angry young man, full of bitterness and anger, who thought the only way to succeed was with violence.

I pursued a court case against the police, only to be told that the odds were against me, but i had a good civil lawyer Tony McGrade who is here today and my criminal lawyer Gerry McClure also here who told me with that my life would be made hell if i took out a civil action against the police.

It took me 4 years to get my case to court. I was arrested 6 times, went to court some 5 times, attempted arrests some 25 times and for the very first time in my life I learned what it felt like to be a victim, an accused and how it felt to be disbelieved and at the mercy of a Criminal Justice System.

I had grown up in Liverpool just two miles away from Toxteth where I heard stories of black males being attacked by a police force that acted more like an occupying force at the time.

Eventually I went to court in 1995 and won my civil action and I became the only black or Asian person in Scottish legal history to win a civil action against Police.

I remember coming out of that Sheriff Court onto Carlton Place and telling my father I know what I want to do next, he looked at me with that painful expression 'of oh no what now' I told him I wanted to be a lawyer and work on that street one day.

I then decided I would return to study Law and did so in 1997 at Strathclyde Law School.

But there were two lessons learned after that night of the attack. The first lesson learned that night was by the authorities, and that was that 'this black boy's big mouth just got bigger.'

The second lesson was learned by me that 'freedom and justice is not handed to you on a plate, we have always had to fight for freedom and justice'.

The more of us who believe that, the more chance we have of justice.

To the students here today I say we are still lucky in this country that we are not stopped by a reign of terror let loose against those who speak for peace and freedom.

Remember that Jimmy Reid gave his speech in 1971 but in 2017 we are still fighting to live.

We want the hundreds of billions of pounds that go to death and destruction to build a new life.

Those billions could lift the wages of ordinary people, give them jobs, build new hospitals, give education and training and give hope to our youth.

We do not have the luxury of waiting, nor can we wait until those who are desperate and vulnerable explode with fury.

I still remember the slogan 'Make Poverty History', from when some of marched on G8 at Gleneagles- a goal which *'no longer appears as a fixed point in the future but a receding point never to be reached'*.

Asylum seekers, the poor, are not only demonised, and exploited but negated as human beings, an object of hatred at worst or of pity at best invisible in their misery.

For many pessimism is the prevailing mood but I remain an optimist. This is because I believe fundamentally 'Man has the capacity to do right as well as wrong'.

Since the dawn of civilisation 'we have seen the tyranny of empires, but history is littered with the ruins of such empires'.

But each ruin is a monument not only to mankind's failures, but to the inherent ability of mankind to fight for freedom and to overcome tyranny. Progress has been made.

In the younger generation there has always been a spirit of dissent and often that voice starts as a minority but when it unites with millions of protesting voices, that dissent becomes our hope.

Over three decades I have always found strength in struggle, in three years ahead as your Rector I pledge to bend every resource of heart and mind to make sure the voices of our students is heard.

Thank you so much for giving me the honour of being the Rector for the University of Glasgow.