

Paul Sweeney MP: Maiden speech

Mr Speaker, right honorable and honorable Members, I am grateful for this opportunity to deliver my maiden speech, and during a debate on such a tumultuous event in our nation's history.

It is customary for a new Member to make some reference to his predecessors, and reflecting upon the introductory remarks of Richard Buchanan in his 1964 maiden speech, I noted that he declared "If it were within my power to introduce a new tradition to this House, it would be that hon. Members who are making their maiden speeches should do so from the Dispatch Box so that they might lay their trembling hands upon it and give some support to their quaking knees."

On rising from these benches today I can thoroughly attest to my sympathy for those sentiments. The only consolation is I won't have too long to wait for relief, as I will have the first opportunity to address the house from the Dispatch Box next week as Shadow Under Secretary of State for Scotland, and I can only hope that it will provide more ample support for my trembling limbs.

Dick Buchanan was the embodiment of the finest political traditions of my constituency, he was a proud railway worker, socialist and trade unionist. During his tenure as a councillor on the Glasgow Corporation it was not unknown for him to turn up at the City Chambers from the Cowlares railway works in his boiler suit, before changing into the dapper pinstriped suit of the City Treasurer. He also left an eminent legacy to future members of this house as Chairman of the House of Commons Library Committee during its transition from an old-style, gentleman's-club library to the expert modern research facility that is at the disposal of Members of Parliament today; which I am sure has been particularly appreciated by those new members preparing their maiden speeches.

The area of Glasgow that I represent has a remarkable and diverse history, and that is reflected in the diversity and vibrancy of the people who live there today. From its early origins at the northern frontier of the Roman Empire, it has subsequently been vital to Glasgow's development, even though it was only formally incorporated into the city in 1891, when Glasgow's territory was doubled in size. The Molindinar Burn, on the banks of which the founder of Glasgow, St. Mungo, established his cathedral and with it the surrounding town, flows from Hogganfield Loch, the fresh waters of which also nourished what is the longest established business in the city of Glasgow, Tennent's Brewery, founded at the Drygate in the 1550s and whose amber nectar has slaked the thirst of many a Glaswegian over the centuries.

When I attempt to visualise the evolution of my part of Glasgow, Danny Boyle's epic opening ceremony from the London 2012 Olympic Games immediately springs to mind. What was once an area of sylvan beauty and rural charm, a landscape of farms and weaver's cottages, was rapidly swept away as the first harbingers of the industrial age emerged – the first canals and, later the first railways in Scotland would traverse the district. By happy coincidence

of its position on the approach to central Glasgow from Edinburgh and the Lanarkshire coalfields, Springburn found itself at the epicentre of this frenetic growth as railway manufacturing and associated industries coalesced there to form the largest centre of locomotive manufacture in the British Empire, at its peak employing 8,000 people and with the capacity to build 600 steam locomotives a year, most which were for export.

Other engineering innovations were pioneered there too, most notably the first motor car built in Britain, the Johnston Dog-cart, built in 1895 by railway engineer George Johnston in the yard of his father's house at Mosesfield on Balgrayhill. The first road trials took place in the dead of night with Johnston driving the car at twelve miles an hour on a twenty-mile journey across Glasgow. For this apparently reckless behaviour, he was charged with contravening the Locomotive Act by driving his 'horseless carriage' during prohibited hours along Buchanan Street, then as now the main shopping thoroughfare in Glasgow.

Today my constituency maintains this fine automotive engineering pedigree in the form of Allied Vehicles, the largest manufacturer of specialist taxi and mobility vehicles in the UK, employing over 650 highly skilled people in Possilpark. This high value manufacturer is also ingrained in the community, supporting many excellent projects such as Possibilities, which supports disabled people in the local area, as well as the highly successful Glasgow Tigers speedway.

Our engineering prowess was also critical to supporting Britain's war effort during the First World War. Springburn's railway works, gave themselves over to the production of munitions for the duration of the war. Throughout this period, they were responsible for producing military locomotives, aeroplanes, tanks, torpedo tubes, gun carriages, pill-boxes, and munitions such as mines and shells. The works also produced the first modern artificial limbs for wounded servicemen.

The directors of the North British Locomotive Company even offered their headquarters building to the Red Cross, as existing hospitals were insufficient to cope with the war wounded. It opened on Christmas eve 1914. Wounded troops would be transported directly to the hospital on specially converted 'ambulance trains'. By the closing day in May 1919, a total of 8,211 servicemen had been treated.

Nearby Stobhill Hospital, the place where I first entered a more peaceful world some 75 years later, was also requisitioned by the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1914 and over 1,000 patients were cared for there at any given time, until the return of the hospital to civilian use in 1920.

As an Army Reservist, the sacrifice that my city made during the First World War has been impressed upon me every year when I attend the Remembrance Day service in George Square. The stark enormity of the statement on the city's cenotaph, that Glasgow raised over 200,000 troops – a fifth of its population – with 18,000 of that number losing their lives, and a further 35,000 injured never fails to move me with the sheer scale of the carnage that afflicted our people a century ago.

My constituency of Glasgow North-East was created at the 2005 general election from the amalgamation of the Glasgow Springburn and Glasgow Maryhill seats. Both areas have previously enjoyed excellent representation from exemplary parliamentarians. Although my seat was once described as a 'Labour citadel', there was even two Conservative Members in the interwar period, though it was thankfully a brief dalliance. The metaphorical and physically towering legacy of my antecedents was brought into sharp focus when I recently had the opportunity to venture into the Speakers House and was confronted by a 14-foot-high oil painting of Lord Martin of Springburn and Port Dundas – if there was ever a more effective device to make someone feel simultaneously inspired and inadequate I've yet to find one!

Michael Martin succeeded Dick Buchanan as the MP for Springburn from 1979 to 2009, of course culminating in his election as Speaker of the House of Commons from 2000 onwards. His parliamentary career, spanning seven consecutive general elections, was selflessly committed to the service of others and epitomises the opportunity that the Labour movement has offered to the advancement of working class people over the last century – rising from a Springburn sheet metal worker and shop steward to become the Speaker of this House. I was particularly gratified to meet Lord Martin just last week, and he told me of his delight that his seat was now back in 'safe hands', as he put it.

My first ever experience of party political campaigning was in the Glasgow North East by-election of 2009, after a telephone call from Gordon Brown's wife Sarah, drew me from my exam revision to help William Bain hold the seat for Labour. As someone who was also born and raised in the local area and both of us the first members of our respective families to benefit from a university education, William proved to be a dedicated, industrious and committed champion for our city and its communities during his time in this House, speaking vociferously in opposition to the Coalition government's vicious and self-defeating austerity policies during his tenure as Shadow Scottish Office Minister.

Before I had the opportunity to meet my immediate predecessor, Anne McLaughlin, I had watched her maiden speech with great interest when she delivered it in July 2015. I was particularly impressed by her yearning passion for improving the lives of her constituents and restoring civic pride to our communities; a passion that I share deeply. Anne cited the example of the project to restore the historic Springburn Winter Gardens, the largest glass house in Scotland, as a totemic symbol of our mission to continue regenerating a community that is still contending with the challenge of urban dereliction. As one of the founders of this project, I was personally delighted that Anne made such a generous endorsement of our efforts in her maiden speech. I would also like to thank her for the friendly and good natured election campaign we conducted in June and I look forward to working together in areas of mutual interest in the future.

All the maiden speeches of my predecessors reflect common challenges facing our constituents over the years. Whilst much progress has been made in certain areas, unfortunately many of the issues they identified decades ago remain all too stubbornly apparent today.

Michael Martin referred to the urgent need to strengthen government intervention to develop new industries that would revitalise the local economy and alleviate the unemployment and despair caused by the collapse of locomotive manufacturing. This is still a legacy of decline that my constituency has never fully recovered from. It was something that I felt keenly from an early age, as I learned about Springburn's past industrial glories from my grandparents.

It is what inspired me to follow my grandfather and father into the Clyde shipbuilding industry, and later Scottish Enterprise, burning with a zeal to rejuvenate the great, Clydebuilt industries that once gave pride and prosperity to our city.

Having recently been involved with the development of Labour's new industrial strategy for Scotland, I am excited about the opportunity we have before us now to unlock a new era of prosperity with the application of coherent, long-term thinking about the development of more high value industries in our country, and I look forward to pursuing that vision with vigorous enthusiasm in this place.

Housing is another recurring matter that is referred to by my predecessors, particularly exploitation by private landlords and the mass clearance of housing in areas like Springburn. Most Glasgow MPs stand in the tradition of John Wheatley and his famous Housing Act of 1924 that provided state subsidies for house building, to build a land fit for heroes. It led directly to the creation of Glasgow's municipal housing system, and saw large scale building of some 57,000 new homes in new districts like Riddrie and Carntyne in my constituency during the inter-war period.

Due to the efforts of my predecessor Michael, and others Glasgow became a pioneer in the modern Housing Association movement, that saved many of the traditional Victorian tenements in areas like Dennistoun and Springburn, and by writing off the city's £1 Billion housing debt, the last Labour government enabled an unprecedented renewal of the city's housing stock, led by organisations like NG Homes, with over £100million invested to improve housing standards in my constituency.

These physical improvements are not just about the sandstone, glass and slate, it's also about reinvigorating the very soul and character of our city; what it means and feels like to be a Glaswegian from one generation to the next.

These efforts have, however, been frustrated by policies from the party opposite that continue to undermine living standards in my constituency. Despite efforts to regenerate our communities, my constituents are still subject to the indignity of benefit sanctions, tax credit cuts and frozen wages. With unemployment and benefit claimant rates in my constituency double the national average and the child poverty level at 36%, the continued onslaught of Tory cuts to their living standards is too much to bear for many. When a constituent approaches me in the street to describe how she was forced to financially support her son and his partner, who was suffering from a terminal brain tumour, for 9 months before his death as he had been found

fit to work and had his benefits cut, it is clear to me that we have seen the creation of a new minimum definition of dignity, where anything short of starvation and anything above destitution is now seemingly acceptable, and is apparently blind to any appeal to human compassion.

It was a view that was only galvanised as I watched the benches opposite cheer with perverse triumph as our effort to remove the public sector pay cap was defeated last month, quite oblivious to the harm this causes to millions of people.

My duty as a Labour Member of Parliament has been crystallised by those observations. The people of Glasgow North East sent me here because they despair at the Tories and yearn for the vision of hope and prosperity that Labour has offered them.

In 1948 this house, having witnessed the disastrous effects of two terrible world wars, was told that the welfare state was established to remove the shame from need and create a society with solidarity at its foundation. Today it is now our solemn responsibility to do everything in our power to defeat this government and restore that abiding principle in our society. That is why the people of Glasgow North East sent me here, and I will do my utmost to repay their faith in me by how I acquit myself in the pursuit of that endeavour in this house.

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