

John McDonnell

Master, Distinguished Governors, Pro-Vice-Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

In the famous novel, The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939, John Steinbeck conjures up the wretched lives of tenant farmers, driven from their homes during the Great Depression and viciously exploited by employers, corporate farmers, and bank managers. Tom Joad, who witnessed labour organizer Jim Casy beaten to death for organizing the oppressed workers to strike, is asked what he plans to do next. His responds that he has come to accept Casy's gospel of social action. He says:

Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build — why, I'll be there. See? God, I'm talking like Casy. Comes of thinkin' about him so much.

It is a scene that brings to mind the man we are honouring today: John McDonnell, politician extraordinaire and tireless advocate for the downtrodden. Like Steinbeck, McDonnell believes in the need to maintain a sense of injustice and the spirit of struggle if the poor are not to lose their dignity. It has been said that The Grapes of Wrath is “an engaged novel with a partisan posture, many complex voices, and passionate prose style”. Despite its fervent account of the effects of economic hardship on the lives of migrants and the poor, there was never an “emotional slide towards sentimentality” in the novel: “there is nothing cynically distanced about it,

nothing coolly modernist". The same might be said about McDonnell: his life has been dedicated to alleviating the lives of those less well-off, without sentimentality, cynicism, or trendy posturing.

Here, at Birkbeck, we are proud to call McDonnell "one of ours". He is an alumnus.

McDonnell is the type of man that Quaker, physician, and philanthropist George Birkbeck had in mind when he founded the Mechanics' Institution (which became Birkbeck) in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It was a project that many at the time viewed as "visionary and absurd". They were right about "visionary", wrong about "absurd".

If McDonnell had been born one and a half centuries earlier, George Birkbeck's vision would have applied to him. McDonnell's father was a bus driver and branch secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union. His son, John, attended the Great Yarmouth Grammar School in Norfolk, one of the oldest schools in the country (established in 1551), and located on Salisbury Road between the railway line and the seaside. At the age of seventeen, however, McDonnell turned his back to its impressive bell tower, firing range, woodwork shop, and well-tended cricket square and football pitch to take up a range of unskilled jobs. He eventually passed his A-levels thanks to night school at Burnley Technical College. He studied at Brunel University for a BSc in Government and Politics and then, here at Birkbeck between 1978 and 1981, he did his MSc in Politics and Sociology, while working in a children's home in Hayes.

The years spent at Birkbeck were, of course, turbulent ones. He started in 1978 during the Winter of Discontent. By the time he finished his MSc in 1981, the

Brixton riots had marked British life. McDonnell was already highly politicised by this time, and Birkbeck served as the springboard to a formidable political career.

It is impossible to do more than briefly sketch out his many achievements here: I am conscious that there are Graduands waiting to traipse down the red-carpet that will, magically, turn them into from Granduands into Graduates.

Let me just remind people of some of McDonnell's accomplishments. From the late 1970s to the 1990s, he was a researcher for the National Union of Mineworkers, then the Trades Union Congress. He headed the Policy Unit at Camden Borough Council, before being appointed Chief Executive of the Association of London Authorities, then the Association of London Government. In all these positions, he showed commitment to energetic grassroots campaigning and, as Ken Livingston's deputy leader, to making a difference for the poorer members of London's population.

In 1997, McDonnell was elected Labour MP for his home constituency, Hayes and Harlington. Since its creation in 1950, this seat had been a Labour Party stronghold. However, had Labour lost the seat in 1983 and it took the energies and commitment of McDonnell to win it back from the Conservatives in 1997 with a 13,000 majority.

How can we explain this success? In a constituency where income levels are consistently below the national average and where the leading trades of manufacturing, distribution, and light industries have taken a heavy hit in the economic crisis, McDonnell is known for his tireless devotion to its residents. His constituency door is always open. He gives a voice to those who don't have one, such as those workers on zero hour contracts who clean our offices. His support for

the London's most precarious workers has shamed employers, including university colleges, into supporting the London Living Wage. As he reminded them, it is obscene to "exploit [our] most vulnerable workers in allowing them to be paid poverty wages".

He has spoken out against miscarriages of justice and spoken up for asylum seekers, single mothers, pensioners, those on benefits, and the disabled. He is an active supporter of Britain's Punjabi community, as well as of Irish migrants. He is a stern critic of military interventions. He chairs Public Services Not Private Profit, an anti-privatisation campaign involving 16 trade unions and a number of major campaigning organisations. He defends the right to protest and chairs the Socialist Campaign Group as well as the Labour Representation Committee, a left-wing group of Labour activists, local parties, trade unionists, and MPs that campaign for socialist policies. Recently, McDonnell launched the People's Parliament, aimed at opening up the Houses of Parliament to the ideas of people who want to debate the state of the country and the future we hope for.

Education is also McDonnell's passion. In 1825, the Mechanic's Oracle lauded George Birkbeck for being "the man who erected a bridge across that gulf which from time immemorial excluded the operative classes from the regions of science". The same can be said of McDonnell. McDonnell rages against the fact that education is no longer "a gift from one generation to another but a commodity to be bought and sold". He argues for free access to higher education and he worries that fees will deter students – particularly those from poorer families, who are more anxious about debt.

It should not be thought that McDonnell is "all work and no play". For thirty-five years, he has supported Hayes Football Club and is currently honorary vice-president of Hayes and Yeading United. He reminds all who will listen that Hayes was

home to great footballers like Cyrille Regis, Les Ferdinand, and Jason Roberts. Not unexpectedly, a refrain that can be heard in so many of McDonnell's speeches echoes in his defences of football: don't forget the grass-roots. Mowed too close, grass-root football will drain England's national team of talent.

McDonnell is described as a man of "Iron Integrity", who always acts on what he believes is right. Speaking to colleagues and friends, I was told time and again that McDonnell is "simply the most principled Member of Parliament". He is "selfless". He is "always passionate, gives all to what he believes in". He is "a fighter".

A few weeks ago, I was at an Occupy Democracy event, at which McDonnell lamented (in his words) "the cuts in welfare benefits, attacks on disabilities, sanctions that are forcing [people into] poverty – we've not seen on such a scale since the 1930s". It was a statement that could have come directly out of Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath was published in 1939. Steinbeck reflected that in "composition, in movement, in tone and in scope", The Grapes of Wrath was "symphonic". The same is true of McDonnell. In order to understand the man, you need to be attuned to delicate harmonies as well as to texture and emotional range; the complexity with which each element speaks to each other; the urgency that drives his compositions.

These are just some of the reasons why we honour John McDonnell today, Fellow of Birkbeck.