

Feargus O'Connor's Speech on Kennington Common, 10th April 1848.

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My children, you were industriously told that I would not be amongst you today. Well, I am here. **(Great cheering).**

I sat, on my way here, on the front seat of the car, and although my life was threatened if I appeared as I now appear, my hand does not tremble.

(Cheers).

You all know for a quarter of a century I have been mixed up with this democratic agitation: in Ireland since the year 1822, in England since 1833; and, as you all know, I have never shrunk from taking my share of all the responsibility.

(Loud cheers).

When I was asked in the House of Commons on Friday, whether or no I would attend this meeting today? I replied, that as I have always sought the lion's portion of the popularity, I would not shrink from encountering now the lion's share of the danger.

(Great applause).

I have always contended for your rights, in and out of Parliament, and to frighten me I have received at least 100 letters, telling me not to come here today, for that if I did, my own life would be the sacrifice. My answer was this – I would rather be stabbed to the heart than resign my proper place at the head of my children.

(Shouts of bravo).

Yes, you are my children; these are your horses, not mine; this car is yours - made of your timber;

I am only your Father and your bailiff, but your honest Father and your unpaid bailiff.

(Cheers).

And if ever your cause was prosperous, if it be not injured by your indiscretion, it is at this moment.

Never was man so badgered as I have been in The House of Commons, and, entitled, as I am, to your confidence, let me know implore you, in the name of that great and good God who has this day blessed us with splendid sunshine, let me counsel you, let me enjoin – nay, I would go down on my knees to beseech you – do not now destroy the cause I have so struggled for all my life.

(Earnest cries of 'Hear, Hear.')

In yonder car(riage)

(pointing to the vehicle which carried the Petition)

go with you the voices of 5,700,000 of your countrymen. They, I, and the whole world, look to you for good and orderly and citizen-like conduct on this occasion.

(Cheers)

In my place in the house, I told the Ministers that they need not be afraid of my counsels, and that they need apprehend no folly on your part. Well, they have not, though they threatened us, interfered with this meeting on Kennington Common.

(Cheers).

That is one great and glorious step achieved, and, as I have always told you, Chartism, when struck down by tyranny, rises only to march onwards with renewed strength.

(Much applause).

And now that I have carried into practical effect that social principle for man's regeneration, enabling him who does not wish to work within the artificial labour market, to obtain land of his own where he may struggle for himself, and not for others, and where there are none to step between him and the fruits of his industry, is not Chartism better worth contending for than ever?

(Cries of "Yes, yes" and cheers).

Then, seeing the results I have in store for you, viewing the consequences which must inevitably follow from such a demonstration as this, let me, with the confidence that I have preserved order, go down to the house to-night to oppose Sir George Grey's treasonable bill, for which I have declared, if no other man comes forward, I will impeach the government.

(Great cheering).

You, my friends, will show them we are Chartists, not pickpockets, and that we will not jeopardise our cause by a single act of wickedness or folly.

(Cheers).

We, at least, have had our meeting.

(Cheer).

The government have taken possession of all the bridges. You know that I have all my life been a man of courage, of firmness, and of resolution; but how should I rest in my bed this night if I were conscious that there were widows awake mourning for husbands slain?

(Hear, Hear).

How should I feel if I thought that by any act of mine I had jeopardised the lives of thousands, and thus paralysed our cause?

(Hear, Hear).

How, I ask, would you feel if you were conscious that you were parties to my death? What would be our trouble and our sorrow, how great would be our loss! These are the sentiments that actuate us all, and, as The Convention have received an intimation that the police will not let the procession pass the bridges, where they guard the ground, The Executive have decided that you shall not be brought into collision with an armed force. These cars will not be allowed to pass, the flags will not be allowed to be displayed. The Executive, therefore, will, as a deputation, take the petition.

I will go to the house to remonstrate against this hindrance. I will present your petition, and I will make your voice heard throughout the length and breadth of the land.

(Cheering).

I ask you, under these circumstances, through good and evil report, to stand by me today.

(Cries of "We will")

Will you obey my counsel, and follow my advice?

("Yes, Yes")

I will remain among you as a hostage, for, so help me God, I will not desert your cause until life deserts me.

(Cheers).

You must, however, bear in mind the great responsibility you impose upon a stranger in your country. You must not forget the charge devolving upon me. I have spent, in your service, six sleepless nights: my breast, at this moment, is like a coal of fire, and I could produce a certificate from a physician to certify that it would be better for me if I were at this instant in

bed.

But I knew where my place was, and I am here; and now let those who will take my advice, and act like prudent and sensible men, yet determined to have their liberties and to see the Charter the law of the land, hold up your hand.

(A monster show of hands on all sides of the speaker).

The petition, be assured, shall be taken down, though not with the procession; for, if we resisted the government, we should only afford them cause for censuring us; and, so help me God, I will die upon the floor of the house or get your rights for you.

(great applause).

I will strive for your liberties and for the proper privileges of the people; but I will maintain the peace. Large as my family is – and you are all my children – I do not wish to miss one from the human feast.

(Cheers).

I love you better than I love my own life. I have given proof upon proof of this. I give you my days and my nights;...Will you, when I have such kindness in store for you, be untrue to yourselves?

I had some fears you might be led astray, but now your voices reassure me; this pain has gone from my breast. I breathe freely again, because I am confident in your sense and your wisdom, and in your resolution to carry this contest to an early issue.

(Cheers)

Good God, my friends, how great will be my power when I rise to ask "Where is the shop lifting?"

"Where has been the danger to life and property?" I will say there never was a peaceful demonstration in any country under such circumstances.

(Loud cheers)

I have received letters innumerable from all parts of the country entreating me to not allow the safety of the movement to be risked by any folly in the metropolis. If you want to kill me, my life is at your command, but to others I will not surrender it without a struggle.

(Great applause).

I will present your petition to-night; on Friday there will be a debate upon it; and nothing can prevent our success if the people do not destroy themselves with intemperance and folly.

(Cheers).

You may well imagine that I, who have suffered so much for you – that I, who if beggared in my old age will be content to go from door to door among my children, established on their own land, will not shrink now from rendering you further service. The whole of my day, the half of my night, is sacrificed to you, and it gladdens my heart, makes my blood bubble, and swells my veins, to find so glorious a response as you now give me in your obedience and your confidence.

(Applause).

Let those of you who think that the Convention have acted wisely in preventing the flow of blood-shed among the people hold up both hands.

(The suggestion was promptly and enthusiastically responded to).

I am glad to see this display. I am glad to see that you need no fuggleman, and that you are so well disciplined. Hear your leader – hear your father:- If you see a man breaking into a shop, do not stop to hand him over to the police, but knock him down at once.

(Cries of "we will").

Do not let it be said that one wrongful act was the act of a Chartist. I come now to disperse you. You will not walk in procession. You must go peaceably to your homes ... show that I am

careful of all the lives here.

I will not forget Ireland in the considerations of today. I look upon Ireland and the Irish Cause as I look upon England and The English Cause; and I hold, after the demonstration of today, and the petition that is to be presented, that it will be impossible to withhold from Irishman their just rights, justly demanded.

(Loud cheers).

I now breath freely again, and may God desert me but I will read the government a lesson in citing you and your resolution, but in telling them of all of your love for order, and your respect for the law.

(Cheers).

The Police, I am now confident, will be unable to take you at a disadvantage. Do not, I say in conclusion, dishonour the Charter, and though I be stretched on the rack I will, if necessary, smile terror out of countenance.

(Cheers).

Go on, conquering and to conquer, until the People's Charter has gloriously become the law of the land!

(Enthusiastic applause)