

**REMARKS BY JONATHAN AITKEN RESPONDING TO TOASTS AT HIS
80th BIRTHDAY PARTY 30/08/22**

Far and away my strongest emotion on this 80th Birthday is gratitude. So in these brief remarks I will offer one or two snapshots of gratitude, many of them directed to those of you who have kindly come here this evening.

My first snapshot of gratitude is for our hostess Jill May who has so generously given this party in her home tonight. I feel a special bond with Jill and with her six offspring. Paddy, Ivo, Lara, India, Rose, Honor and Daisy. As Jill has mentioned I had a profound friendship with her marvellous and inspirational late husband Mick. Our bond deepened because he and my beautiful wife left this world at almost the same time earlier this year, and some of their final days were spent in adjacent rooms in the same hospital. So, Jill and I went through the valley of bereavement together. Our spouses were both lovers of a good party so I would like to think that marvellous Mick and marvellous Elizabeth are here in spirit enjoying this party too from their celestial perches.

My second snapshot of gratitude is for my family. I thank William for his far too flattering words. I thank my daughters Alexandra and Victoria for being here and also their mother, my beloved first wife Lolitza, for coming over from Switzerland to celebrate my birthday.

My third daughter, Petra, is unable to be here for the happiest of reasons, namely that she is on her honeymoon in America. She sent me a lovely email this morning and I am delighted that her mother, Soraya, is here tonight.

Like all families we have had our ups and downs, but it is wonderful that so many of us are able to celebrate together at this party.

My earliest memory, which dates back to World War II, is interesting for both family and historical reasons. At the age of three I was playing in the sandpit in the large garden of the house of Putney of my Great Uncle the first Lord Beaverbrook. My cousin, Maxwell, the present Lord Beaverbrook who is here tonight will well remember that house - The Vineyard, 79 Hurlingham Road.

I was enjoying the sandpit so much that I was oblivious to a phut-phut-phut sound in the skies above of a V2 Flying Bomb. But my Aunt Gyp flew into a panic, and despite my resistance, dragged me out of the sandpit towards The Vineyard's air raid shelter shouting "Doodlebug! Doodlebug!" The bomb actually landed on a next-door house in Foskett Road so it was the first of many close shaves in my life. For a while it was a family joke that long before I could say Mamma or Dadda I often said: "Doo-bug!"

My third snapshot of gratitude is for my schooldays and school friends. Two or three of them are here tonight. One is Johnny Nutting. We arrived at Eton as new boys on the same day in 1956. The Suez crisis was at its height. Johnny's father had just courageously resigned from the Eden Government. My Canadian born father, turned British MP, was an Eden loyalist who took a dim view of Nutting senior's resignation. Somewhat unwisely I passed on my father's views to Nutting junior. Whereupon Johnny promptly punched me on the nose. It was an unusual beginning to our 66 year old friendship!

Then on to Oxford where I devoted the minimum time to my undergraduate studies of the law and the maximum time to making speeches in debates at the Oxford Union. Two stars of that era are here tonight, Jeffrey Archer who was even more bouncy and irrepressible than he is now, and Michael Beloff whose wit and forensic skills made him President of the Oxford Union.

Michael and I were selected to be the British Student Debating Team, sent off to America for four months to debate against some fifty US universities. We wrote a book as a joint account of our experiences on that tour "*A Short Walk on the Campus*". Not a great work of literature perhaps yet it sold well. When *Time* magazine reviewed the book it concluded with the line: "*We would have liked Mr Aitken and Mr Beloff rather more if they had liked themselves rather less*".

Then on to journalism, where my first job was on the *East Anglian Daily Times* in Ipswich where I held the post of 'Assistant Tennis and Funerals reporter'. My main qualification was to be quick at changing clothes. Then on to Fleet Street as a war correspondent in Vietnam, Biafra and the Middle East. There are two or three journalists of those times here tonight.

Far and away the most distinguished of us all became Editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, who I am delighted could come tonight. Once an adversary, now a friend. We both enjoy a good fight – hopefully never again against each other! We have been battling for the past four years along with Professor Nigel Biggar (also here) to clear up the Augean Stables of Christ Church – my once great Oxford College. This is still work in progress, but we are winning.

Then came political and Parliamentary life. I loved my years at Westminster where I made many good House of Commons friends, well represented tonight sometimes across the party divides. Of these I would highlight my Labour pair for over 10 years, Diane Abbott and a rising star in the Liz Truss firmament - Jacob Rees-Mogg. Jacob I see that you are tipped in the press to take the Cabinet post of Chief Secretary to the Treasury. If that's true I can tell you, as an ex-Chief Secretary, that it is one of the most rewarding jobs in government, for you control expenditure across all Whitehall Departments and can exercise great political creativity in so doing.

Virtually all Chief Secretaries are promoted to much grander jobs in the Cabinet. I was a rare exception to this rule of ascent for I moved down in the world from HM Treasury to HM Prison.

However, contrary to my own and everyone else's expectations (except for those of the great prison reformer Lord Longford whose daughter Antonia Fraser and son Thomas Pakenham are here) I discovered, as Frank Longford had predicted, that prison was far from a negative experience.

Of course, there were some bad moments but, with the wisdom of hindsight, I now see my prison sentence as the great turning point of my life. For without prison:

- I would never have gone to Wycliffe Hall Oxford to read Theology making many new friends including Graham Tomlin, here tonight, who, as the Bishop of Kensington, later played a pivotal role in my ordination;
- I would never have written 19 books, most of them published by Continuum and Bloomsbury under Robin Baird-Smith who is also here;
- I would never have met Mick May and worked together with him for many years as Vice Chair of his charity Blue Sky;
- I would never have felt the call to ordination as a priest and prison chaplain;
- I would never have found my vocation to serve in the chaplaincy at HMP Pentonville alongside my friends and colleagues: Governor, Ian Blakeman, Deputy Governor, Kat Lawrence, and Managing Chaplain, Jo Davies - all here tonight.

So putting all this together, it is now clear the most extraordinary paradox of my career is that the apparent calamity of going to prison has turned out to be the greatest blessing of my life.

Happy is the man who at the age of four score years is still extremely busy, totally fulfilled by the vocation he loves, surrounded on his 80th Birthday by the laughter and love of family and friends.

Thank you all for coming and to Jill for hosting this wonderful party.