

# Aung San Suu Kyi: Address to Houses of Parliament, London, 2012

In June 2012, newly-elected MP and National League for Democracy leader [Aung San Suu Kyi](#) visited the UK. In this clip she addressed the Joint Houses of Commons and Lords at [Westminster Hall](#).

The transcript of Aung San Suu Kyi's speech is original. The video is from [Ronald Ellis's website](#). You can also view a [BBC version](#) here.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Lord Speaker, Mr Speaker, Mr Prime Minister, My Lords, and Members of the House of Commons

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you here in this magnificent hall. I am very conscious of the extraordinary nature of this honor. I understand that there was some debate as to whether I would speak here in this splendid setting or elsewhere in the Palace of Westminster. I welcome that debate and discussion. It is what Parliament is all about.

I have just come from Downing Street. It is my first visit there, and yet for me it is a familiar scene. Not just from television broadcasts, but from my own family history. As some of you may be aware, the best-known photograph of my father, Aung San [ [Wikipedia](#), [Youtube](#) ], taken shortly before his assassination in 1947 was of him standing in Downing St with Clement Atlee and others with whom he had been discussing Burma's transition to independence.

He was pictured wearing a [large British military-issue](#)

[greatcoat](#). This had been given to him by Jawaharlal Nehru en route to the UK to protect him against the unaccustomed cold. And I must say that not having left my tropical country for 24 years, there have been the odd moments this week when I have thought of that coat myself.

A couple of hours ago I was photographed in the same place where my father was photographed, together with Prime Minister David Cameron, and it was raining. Very British!

My father was a founding member of the Burmese Independence Army in World War 2. He took on this responsibility out of a desire to see democracy established in his homeland. It was his view that democracy was the only political system worthy of an independent nation. It is a view of course that I have long shared.

[General Slim](#), commander of the 14th Army, who led the Allied Burmese campaign, wrote about his first encounter with my father in his memoir 'Defeat until Victory.' The meeting came towards the end of the war, shortly after my father had decided that the Burmese Independence Army should join forces with the Allies. General Slim said to my father "You've only come to us because we are winning."

To which my father replied "It wouldn't be much good coming to you if you weren't!"

Slim saw in my father a practical man with whom he could do business. Six decades later, I strive to be as practical as my father was.

And so I am here, in part, to ask for practical help. Help as a friend and as an equal. In support of the reforms which can bring better lives and greater opportunities to the people of Burma who have been for so long deprived of their rights and place in the world.

As I said yesterday in Oxford, my country today stands at the

start of a journey toward I hope a better future. So many hills remain to be climbed, chasms to be bridged, obstacles to be breached.

Our own determination can get us so far. The support of the people of Britain and of peoples around the world can get us so much further.

In a speech about change and reform, it is very appropriate to be in Westminster Hall, because at the heart of this process, must be the establishment of a strong, parliamentary institution in my own country.

The British Parliament is perhaps the pre-eminent symbol to oppressed peoples around the world of freedom of speech. I would imagine that some people here, to some extent, take this freedom for granted.

For us in Burma, what you take for granted, we have had to struggle for long and hard. So many people in Burma gave up so much, gave up everything in Burma's ongoing struggle for democracy, and we are only now just beginning to see the fruits of our struggle.

Westminster has long set a shining example of realizing the people's desire to be part of their own legislative process.

In Burma our parliament is in its infancy, having been established only in March 2011. As with any new institution, especially an institution which goes against the cultural grain of 49 years of direct military rule, it will take time to find its feet and time to find its voice.

Our new legislative processes, which undoubtedly are an improvement on what has gone before, are not as transparent as they might be.

I would like to see us learn from established examples of parliamentary democracies elsewhere, so that we might deepen

our own democratic standards over time.

Perhaps the most critical moment in establishing the credibility of the parliamentary process happens before parliament even opens, namely the people's participation in a free fair inclusive electoral process.

Earlier this year, I myself participated in my first election as a candidate. To this day however, I have not yet had the chance to vote freely in any election. In 1990 I was allowed to cast an advanced vote while under house arrest.

But I was prevented from contesting as a candidate for my party, the National League for Democracy. I was disqualified on the grounds that I had received help from foreign quarters. This amounted to BBC broadcasts that the authorities considered to be biased in my favour. What struck me most ahead of this year's by-elections, was how quickly people in the constituencies around Burma grasped the importance of participating in the political process. They understood first hand that the right to vote was not something given to all. They understood that they must take advantage when the opportunity arose, because they understood what it meant to have that opportunity taken away from them.

During the years that I lived in the United Kingdom, I never had the right to vote myself. But I can remember, even during my university days, that I was always trying to encourage my friends to exercise their right to vote. It was never clear to me if they followed these instructions. But it was very clear to me even then that if we do not regard the rights we have, we run the risk of seeing those rights erode away.

To those who feel themselves to be somehow above politics I want to say that politics should be seen neither as something that exists above us, nor as something that happens beneath us, but something that is integral to our everyday existence.

After my marriage, I constantly preached my gospel of political participation to my late husband, [Michael](#). I still

distinctly recall the occasion when a canvasser knocked on the door of our Oxford home during an election campaign. Michael opened the door and when he saw the gentleman poised to deliver his campaign pitch, said "It's no use trying to win me over. It's my wife who decides how I should vote. She's out now. Why don't you come back later?"

The canvasser did come back later, mainly I think to see what a wife who decided how her husband should vote looked like.

It has been less than 100 days, since I together with my fellow National League for Democracy candidates was out on the campaign trail across Burma. Our by-elections were held on April 1st, and I conscious there was a certain skepticism that this would turn out to be an elaborate April Fool's joke. In fact, it turned out to be an April of new hope.

The voting process was largely free and fair and I would like to pay tribute to [President Thein](#) for this and for his commitment and his sincerity in the reform process.

As I have long said, it is through dialogue and through cooperation that political differences can best be resolved, and my own commitment to this path remains as strong as ever. Elections in Burma are very different to those in many more established democracies such as yours. Apathy, especially amongst the young, is certainly not an issue. For me, the most encouraging and rewarding aspect of our own elections was the participation in such vast numbers and with such enthusiasm of our young people. Often our biggest challenge was in restraining the crowds of university students, schoolchildren and flag-waving toddlers who greeted us on the campaign, blocking the roads throughout the length of towns.

The day before the elections, on the way to my constituency, I passed a hillock which had been occupied by a group of children, the oldest about 10 or 11, their leader standing at the summit holding the NLD flag.

The passion of the electorate was a passion born of hunger for

something long denied.

Following Burma's independence in 1948, our parliamentary system was of course based on that of the United Kingdom. The era became known in Burmese as the Parliamentary Era, a name which, by the mere necessity of its application, speaks of the unfortunate changes which followed.

Our parliamentary era, which lasted more or less until 1962, could not be said to have been perfect. But it was certainly the most progressive and promising period until now in the short history of independent Burma. It was at this time that Burma was considered the nation most likely to succeed in South East Asia. Things did not however go entirely to plan. They often don't in Burma and indeed in the rest of the world.

Now once again we have an opportunity to re-establish true democracy in Burma. It is an opportunity for which we have waited many decades. If we do not use this opportunity, if we do not get things right this time around, it may be several decades more before a similar opportunity arises again.

And so it is for this reason that I would ask Britain as one of the oldest parliamentary democracies to consider what it can do to build the sound institutions needed to support our nascent parliamentary democracy.

The reforms taking place led by [President Thein Sein](#) are to be welcomed. But this cannot be a personality-based process. Without strong institutions this process will not be sustainable. Our legislature has much to learn about the democratization process, and I hope that Britain and other democracies can help by sharing your own experiences with us.

Thus far I have only spent a matter of minutes inside the Burmese Parliament when I took the oath as a new MP last month. I must say that I found the atmosphere rather formal. Men have to wear formal headgear. There is certainly no heckling. I would wish that over time perhaps we would reflect

the liveliness and relative informality of Westminster. I am not unaware of the saying that more tears have been shed over wishes granted than over wishes denied.

Nevertheless, it is when Burma has its own satisfactory equivalent of Prime Minister's Questions that we will be able to say that parliamentary democracy has truly come of age.

I would also like to emphasize the importance of establishing requisite parliamentary control over the budget.

In all this, what is most important is to empower the people, the essential ingredient of democracy. Britain is living proof that a constitution does not need to be written down to be effective. It is more important that a constitution should be accepted by the people, that the people feel it belongs to them, that it is not an external document imposed on them.

One of the clearly stated aims of my party, the National League for Democracy, is constitutional reform. [Burma's] original constitution was drawn up following the meeting between my father [Aung San](#) and [Clement Atlee here in London in 1947](#). This constitution may not have been perfect, but at its core was a profound understanding of and respect for the aspirations of the people.

The current constitution, drawn up by the military government in 2008, must be amended to incorporate the basic rights and aspiration of Burma's ethnic nationalities. In over sixty years of independence Burma has not yet known a time when we could say that there is peace throughout the land.

At this very moment, hostilities continue between the Kachin forces and the state armed forces in the north. In the west, communal strife has led to the loss of innocent lives and the displacement of tens of thousands of hapless citizens. Since this speech was drafted, I've also heard that hostilities have resumed in the east of the country between Shan troops and the troops of the government.

We need to address the problems that lie at the root of conflict. We need to develop a culture of political settlement through negotiation and to promote the rule of law, that all who live in Burma may enjoy the benefits of both freedom and security.

In the immediate term, we also need humanitarian support for the many peoples in the north and west, largely women and children, who have been forced to flee their homes.

As the long history of the United Kingdom shows clearly, people never lose their need to preserve their national or ethnic identity. This is something which goes beyond, which supersedes economic development. And that is why I hope that in working for Burma's national reconciliation, the international community will recognize that it is political dialogue and political settlement which must be given precedence over short term economic development.

If differences remain unresolved, if basic aspirations remain unfulfilled, there cannot be an adequate foundation for sustainable development of any kind – economic, social or political.

Britain has for so long, under successive governments, including the present Conservative /Liberal Democratic coalition, and the previous Labour government, been a staunch and unshakeable supporter of aid efforts in Burma. I hope that you can continue to help our country through targeted and coordinated development assistance. Britain has been until now the largest bilateral donor to Burma. It is in education in particular that I hope the British can play a major role. We need short-term results so that our people may see that democratization has a tangible positive impact on their lives.

Vocational training and creation of employment opportunities to help address Burma's chronic youth unemployment are particularly important. Longer term, Burma's education system



is desperately weak. Reform is needed, not just of schools and the curriculum, and the training of teachers, but also of our attitude to education, which is too narrow and rigid.

I hope also that British businesses can play a role in supporting the democratic reform process, through what I have termed democracy-friendly investment. By this I mean investment that prioritizes transparency, accountability, workers' rights, and environmental sustainability. Investment particularly in labor-intensive sectors when carried out responsibly and with positive intent, can offer real benefits to our people.

One test will be whether new players will benefit from the investment coming in. Britain has played an important role in facilitating the forthcoming visit next month of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative Secretariat. I hope this will be the start of many similar initiatives in the month ahead.

It is through learning, while at Oxford, about two great British leaders, Gladstone and Disraeli, that I first developed my understanding of parliamentary democracy: that one accepts the decision of the voters; that the governing power is gained and relinquished in accordance with the desires of the electorate, and that ultimately everyone gets another chance.

These are things taken for granted here in Britain, but in 1990, the winner of the elections was never allowed even to convene parliament. I hope that we can leave such days behind us, and that as we look forward to the future, it will be the will of the people that is reflected faithfully in Burma's changing political landscape.

This journey out of Burma has not been a sentimental pilgrimage to the past, but an exploration of the new opportunities at hand for the people of Burma. I have been

struck throughout my trip by how extraordinarily warm-hearted and open the world has been to us.

To experience this first hand after so long physically separated from the world has been very moving. Countries that geographically are distant have shown that they are close to Burma in what really matters: They are close to the aspirations of the people of Burma. We are brought into proximity through our shared values, and no geographical distance, no human-made barriers can stand in our way.

During the years of my house arrest, it was not just the BBC and other broadcasting stations that kept me in touch with the world outside. It was the music of Mozart and Ravi Shankar and the biographies of men and women of different races and religions that convinced me I would never be alone in my struggle. The prizes and honors I received were not so much a personal tribute as a recognition of the basic humanity that unites one isolated person to the rest of the world.

During our dark days in the 1990s, a friend sent me a poem by [Arthur Hugh Clough](#). It begins – I think many of you will know it – Say not the Struggle Naught Availeth. I understand that Winston Churchill, one of the greatest parliamentarians this world has known, used this poem as a plea to the United States to step in against Nazi Germany.

Today I want to make a rather different point that we can work together, combining political wisdom from East and West to bring the light of democratic values to all peoples in Burma and beyond.

I will just read the final verse. (I was advised that the whole poem was far too long)

*And not by eastern windows only,  
When daylight comes, comes in the light;  
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!  
But westward, look, the land is bright!*

I would like to emphasize in conclusion that this is the most important time in Burma. That this is the time of our greatest need. And so I would ask that our friends both here in Britain and beyond participate in and support Burma's efforts towards the establishment of a truly just and democratic society

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address the members of one of the oldest democratic institutions in the world. Thank you for letting me into your midst. My country has not entered the ranks of truly democratic societies but I am confident that we will get there before too long.

With your help.

Therapist: You know, we have to stop...