

# Bernie Sanders to Brooklyn College Graduates: Don't "Allow Demagogues to Divide Us"

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Let me begin by congratulating the graduating class of 2017. Today is an important day in your lives, something that you've worked hard to attain, and I want to wish all of you the very best of luck in your future endeavors. May you all live healthy and happy lives, doing the work you enjoy and surrounded in love by family and friends. Let me thank president Michelle Anderson, Nicole Haas,  
5 the Brooklyn College Administration, faculty and staff and all of you for inviting my wife, Jane, and me back to Brooklyn, where we were both born and raised. I am greatly appreciative of the honorary degree which you bestow on me today.

I grew up in Flatbush<sup>1</sup> and graduated from James Madison High School. Jane was raised in Flatbush and Bed-Stuy<sup>2</sup>, and graduated from St. Savior's High School a few miles away from here. In  
10 1959, I attended Brooklyn College for a year – a year which had a major impact in my life. Thank you, Brooklyn College. After that year I left for the University of Chicago, where I eventually graduated. My mom had died the previous year and I felt it was time to leave the neighborhood and see what the rest of the world looked like.

My childhood in Brooklyn was shaped by two profound realities. First, my mom, dad and older  
15 brother Larry, who graduated from Brooklyn College, lived in a 3 ½ room rent-controlled<sup>3</sup> apartment. As with many families who don't have a lot of money, financial pressures caused friction and tension within our household. From those experiences I have never forgotten that there are millions of people throughout this country who struggle to put food on the table, pay the electric bill, try to save for their kids' education or for retirement – people who face painful and stress-filled decisions  
20 every single day.

The second reality that impacted my life was that my father left Poland at the age of 17 from a community which was not only very poor, but from a country where anti-Semitism, pogroms and attacks on Jews were not uncommon. While my father emigrated to the United States, and escaped  
25 Hitler and the holocaust, many in his family did not. For them, racism, right-wing extremism and ultra-nationalism were not "political issues." They were issues of life and death – and they died.

From that experience, what was indelibly stamped on me was the understanding that we must never allow demagogues to divide us up by race, by religion, by national origin, by gender or sexual orientation. Black, white, Latino, Asian American, Native American, Christian, Jew, Muslim and every  
30 religion, straight or gay, male or female we must stand together. This country belongs to all of us.

As a United States senator from Vermont let me give you a very brief overview of some of the very serious crises we currently face – crises which do not often get the kind of discussion they  
deserve.

As a student at James Madison High School, many years ago, I recall my social studies teacher talking about how there were small developing countries around the world that were oligarchic<sup>4</sup>  
35 societies – places where the economic and political life of the nation were controlled by a handful of very wealthy families. It never occurred to me then that the United States of America, our great nation, could move in that direction. But that is precisely what is happening. Today, the top 1/10 of 1% now owns almost as much wealth as the bottom 90%, 20 Americans now own as much wealth as the bottom half of America and one family – the Walton family<sup>5</sup> – owns more wealth than the

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<sup>1</sup> area in Brooklyn, New York

<sup>2</sup> area in Brooklyn, New York

<sup>3</sup> (here) cheap

<sup>4</sup> run by few people in power

<sup>5</sup> *Walton family*: owners of the supermarket chain, Walmart

40 bottom 42 percent of our people. In the last 17 years, while the middle class continues to decline, we have seen a tenfold increase in the number of billionaires – going from 51 to 565. In America today, CEOs of major corporations now earn about 350 times more than the average worker makes. In terms of income, 52 percent of all new income goes to the top 1%. In other words, the very rich are becoming much richer.

45 At the same time as we have more income and wealth inequality than any other major nation, 43 million Americans live in poverty, we have the highest rate of childhood poverty of almost any major country on Earth, half of older workers have nothing in the bank as they approach retirement and in some inner cities and rural communities youth unemployment is sky high. Unbelievably, in many parts of this country today, as a result of hopelessness and despair, life expectancy is actually  
50 declining as a frightening number of people experience drug addiction, alcoholism and suicide. And, because of poverty, racism and a broken criminal justice system, we have more people in jail than any other country – disproportionately black, Latino and Native American. Directly related to the oligarchic economy that we currently have is an oligarchic and corrupt political system which is undermining American democracy. As a result of the disastrous Citizens United Supreme Court  
55 decision<sup>6</sup>, corporations and billionaires are able to spend unlimited sums of money on elections. The result is that today a handful of billionaire families are spending hundreds of millions a year to make sure that candidates who represent the rich and the powerful get elected.

And we are seeing the results of how oligarchy functions right now in Congress where the Republican leadership wants to throw 23 million people off of health insurance, cut Medicaid<sup>7</sup> by  
60 over \$800 billion, defund Planned Parenthood<sup>8</sup>, cut food stamps and other nutrition programs by over \$200 billion, cut Head Start<sup>9</sup> and after school programs, make drastic cuts in Pell<sup>10</sup> grants and other programs that help make college more affordable.

And, unbelievably, at exactly the same time, they want to provide the top one percent with \$3 trillion in tax cuts. The very rich get much richer and they get huge tax cuts. The middle class shrinks  
65 and the poor struggle, and they will find it harder to get health care, housing, nutrition, education or clean water.

In response to these very serious problems it seems to me that we have two choices. First we can throw up our hands in despair. We can moan and groan. We can withdraw from the public reality that we face. We can loudly proclaim that we can't beat the system.

70 That is one response. It is an understandable response but it is not an acceptable response. It is not an acceptable response because the reality that we face today impacts not only our lives, but the lives of our children, the lives of our grandchildren and, with regard to climate change, the very future of this planet. The truth is that the only rational choice we have, the only real response we can make, is to stand up and fight back – reclaim American democracy and create a government that  
75 works for all of us, and not just the 1 percent.

And for us to do that it is necessary that we fight for a vision of a new America. An America based on progressive, humane values, not the values of the oligarchy.

And what does that mean, briefly in concrete terms?

80 It means that, no, we are not going to throw 23 million Americans off the health care they have. We are going to bring about health care for all as a right, not a privilege.

It means that, no, we are not, as the current administration is, denying the reality of climate change. We are going to take on the fossil fuel industry, transform our energy system away from fossil fuels to energy efficiency and sustainable energy.

85 It means, no, we are not going to cut Pell grants and other student assistance. We are going to do what Germany, what Scandinavia, what countries all over the world do. And that is to make certain

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<sup>6</sup> *Citizens United Supreme Court decision*: court decision allowing companies to pay for political campaigns

<sup>7</sup> state help to pay the medical bills of poor people

<sup>8</sup> *Planned Parenthood*: organization providing sexual health care

<sup>9</sup> *Head Start*: organization that provides pre-school education for low-income families

<sup>10</sup> programme helping students pay for their education

the public colleges and universities are tuition-free and we're going to significantly lower student debt because we believe that anyone in America has the ability and the desire to be able to get a higher education regardless of his or her income.

90 And, no, we're not going to do what the attorney general of the United States now wants. We're not going to put more people in jail. We're going to fix a broken criminal justice system and invest in education and jobs for our young people, not more jails and incarceration.

No, we're not going to defund Planned Parenthood. We're going to vigorously defend a woman's right to choose.

95 My friends, let me conclude by saying this. We live in the wealthiest country in the history of the world. We are seeing exploding technology which, if used well, has extraordinary potential to improve life. We are an intelligent and hardworking people. If we are prepared to stand together; if we take on greed and selfishness; if we refuse to allow demagogues to divide us up there is no end to what the great people of our nation can accomplish.

100 So today as you graduate Brooklyn College, my message to you is very simple. Think big, not small, and help us create the nation that we all know we can become. Thank you all very much.

(2017)