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Speech of Gavin Cleland

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My name is Gavin Cleland and my younger son, Robert, was killed in the Piper Alpha Disaster, just over 15 years ago.

On 6th July 1988 167 men on board the Pier Alpha oil rig were killed, Robert was one of them. I think, it was the world’s worst offshore oil disaster. The men who were killed left behind mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, wives and children struggling to come to terms with the loss of their loved one. My story is just one of those many tragedies. When Robert was killed he was 33 years old, had he been alive today, he would soon have been 49 years old.

Since the disaster I have very little rest, especially of my mind. I have spent the last 15 years of my life fighting against a brick wall, that is the Scottish Criminal Justice System. The British State. Despite one of the worst disasters in British history and the death of 167 men, the company that owned Piper Alpha - Occidental Petroleum (Caledonia) Ltd and its senior directors have not been brought to justice and prosecuted for any offences relating to the death of the workers. The failure to bring those who are responsible to account is nothing more than a national scandal and a damning indictment of the criminal justice system.

However it is also an important lesson for us today. It remains important now as the Lord Advocate continues to have such a poor prosecution record over the prosecution of health and safety and homicide offences probably the worst in the whole of Britain

Before I tell you, of some of the things that I have done over the past 15 years to get justice, I want to say a few words about our dear son, Robert.

Our son Robert was born on 3rd November 1954. In the best room of his grannies council house, in the Carntyne District of Glasgow. I remember it quite well. Weather wise I don’t think that it was a good day but the birth of Robert made the sun shine. It was a very happy day for me and my wife, Hetty and the rest of the family.

Robert was the youngest of three boys. Sadly, 2 days before Roberts 12th birthday, my wife, Hetty, Robert’s mother, died and so I raised Robert and his older two brothers with the good help of my sisters-in-law and my brother-in-law.

At 16 Robert left school and started his apprenticeship as a plumber. When he turned 18 years of age Robert joined the army and served in the Royal Highlands Fusilier. He served his country for 4 years of his life. At the age of 20 Robert got married. At the time of the disaster Robert and his wife were happily married and had two good healthy children. Robert’s daughter got married in August this year.

In 1981 Robert started work in the offshore oil industry, on the Piper Alpha platform. Robert was employed by a company called Bowden Drilling Company, which was one of the companies that worked on board the Piper Alpha platform.

Robert was initially employed as a ‘Roustabout’– which meant that he assisted the oil drillers. In the 15 months prior to the disaster, he worked as a ‘Derek Man’– which meant that he worked on top of a tall tower, and was responsible for aligning the pipes which were used to pump out the oil from under the sea bed. None of the workers, including Robert dared raise questions about health and safety for fear of not

getting any future work.

On the night that Piper Alpha went ablaze, I was at home in Glasgow. Just after 7am on Thursday 7th of July 1988, I was telephoned by my eldest son, Gavin who told me that there had been an explosion on the Piper Alpha oilrig.

Piper Alpha was a large production platform in the North Sea that started oil production in the mid 70's. Its operating company was Occidental Petroleum (Caledonia) Ltd – known as "OpCal" –, which was an owned subsidiary of (Occidental Petroleum Corporation) Ltd.

I did not think for one minute that Robert might have been killed. I just assumed that Robert was amongst the survivors. I thought that Robert would probably be with his friends and work colleagues on board a raft drifting somewhere in the North Sea.

My family and I drove from Glasgow to Aberdeen to see Robert and to make sure he was all right. When we arrived in Aberdeen, there was a lot of confusion. The police were unable to give us much information about what had happened on board the Piper Alpha and the names of those who had survived. We therefore drove to the Royal Infirmary hoping to find Robert. But we could not see him amongst the badly burnt and injured survivors. Even at this point, I still believed that Robert was alive, and that we would eventually find him. Little did I know that at that moment he was lying dead at the bottom of the sea.

That evening we stayed at a hotel with a couple of dozen other families. I could not bring myself to watch the television pictures of what was happening. The next day, the police asked me whether Robert had any tattoos or distinguishing marks on his body, which could identify him. I knew at that moment that something was not right and I broke down. I could not bring myself to answer the questions. The questions were answered by my sons Gavin and Joe and by my brother-in-law, Joe. On Saturday the police told us that Robert was officially missing so we drove back home to Glasgow.

My worst fears came true on Monday when my son Gavin broke the news to me that they had recovered Robert's body from the seabed. Whilst in Aberdeen I did not view Robert's body, but my son's Gavin and Joe did for me. Robert's funeral took place on Friday 15th July 1988.

After the funeral I was still in shock and found it difficult to come to terms with the number of people who had been killed and injured. Very little real information was given to the public about what caused the disaster. Occidental was doing all the talking. Several weeks after the disaster I remember reading some of the first statements issued by the company to the media, which contained allegations of drug taking on the platform by some workers. I was angry to read that some papers were carrying stories of drug taking on the platform. These statements were, I believe, an organised diversion by Occidental and others. I believe that the companies were trying to divert attention away from them and trying to blame the workers for their own deaths. Occidental was trying to create a large gulf between the public and the bereaved families, that was Occidental's aim short and long term. At that point I knew I would have to campaign to get justice.

From September 1988 I started to write to I wrote to the Prime Minister and Scotland's 72 MP's at Westminster. Between that date and the end of April 1997, I wrote to them at least 3 times each. I also wrote to Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair. I received letters of sympathies from half of the MP's that I had written to. Occidental kept up a barrage of stories of big pay outs to the families. Again the split tactics.

The public inquiry into the disaster started in January 1989. It was chaired by Lord Cullen spread over 13 months. I spent much of my time at the public inquiry.

I found out that a small explosion had occurred shortly before the first big explosion, which happened at

about 10pm. The disaster began with a routine maintenance procedure. A pump in the processing area needed to have its pressure safety valve checked every 18 months. It was due for a check. The valve was removed for maintenance, leaving the pipe open. The worker who had taken the valve off the pipe, had replaced it with a blank flange and secured it to the pipe opening. That was stated at the public inquiry by this workers supervisor. Because the workers could not get all the equipment they needed by 6 p.m., they asked for and received permission to leave the rest of the work until the next day.

But later in the evening during the next work shift, a little before 10 p.m., the primary condensate pump failed. The people in the control room, who were in charge of operating the platform, decided to start the backup pump, not knowing that it was under maintenance. Gas products escaped from the hole left by the valve, which ignited and exploded. The firewalls were not explosion proof. The force of the explosion blew down the firewall separating different parts of the processing facility. Heavy oil equipment was damaged and before long large quantities of stored oil was burning out of control.

The automatic deluge system, which was designed to spray water on such a fire in order to contain it or put it out, was never activated because it had been turned off. The water outlets had been blocked off for over 2 years.

About twenty minutes after the initial explosion, the heat from the fire ruptured the gas line, resulting in a catastrophic gas explosion. The jet of fuel dramatically increased the size of the fire from a billowing fireball to a towering inferno. At the fire's peak, the flames reached three hundred to four hundred feet in the air and could be felt from over a mile away and seen from eighty-five.

The crew began to congregate in the living accommodation area, the part of the platform that was the farthest from the blaze and seemed the least dangerous, awaiting helicopters to take them to safety. There was no sign of a rescue helicopter for 1 hour and 35 minutes. The first helicopter was an RAF rescue helicopter. At no stage was there a systematic attempt to lead men to escape from the accommodation area.

Those who tried to find a means of escape found that smoke and flames blocked all routes to the lifeboats. Many therefore headed back towards the accommodation area. There they were mostly protected from the heat and flame for a while, but not the choking smoke. Men began to lie on the ground with wet rags over their mouths and faces. Some of them realised that they might die. Eventually like the other platforms on the Piper Alpha the accommodation platform slowly collapsed and slipped into the sea.

There were 229 men on the platform at the time. 62 were on night shift duty while the remainder were in the accommodation. It is difficult to imagine what it must have been like for these men. Some people realized that the only way to safety was to jump into the sea. Men ran to the railing, only to see a daunting drop of over a 150 feet to the surface of the water, lit by the patches of flaming oil floating around the platform. Those who jumped had to alternate between staying underwater and freezing in the North Sea and keeping their heads in the air to cook. Those who stayed behind died of carbon monoxide poisoning and some also died of burns.

Stories from survivors illustrate how horrible the situation was. One man had just come to the platform that day and had no idea where he was or how to get around. All he could see was that he was on a walkway high up in a cloud of smoke. He made the decision that it would be better to die from jumping and hitting the deck than from burning alive. He jumped, fell into the ocean, and was one of the lucky ones who survived. Another man – who survived - was heard to call out a repeated request for anyone who worked for the same company as he did. When asked afterwards why he would do such a thing in such a situation, he replied, "I didn't want to die alone."

62 persons survived and 167 were killed.

What was clear from the public inquiry was that these men had simply no chance of surviving. It was a

miracle that the disaster had not happened sooner.

Lord Cullen's Report was published on 12th November 1990. About a fortnight before Mrs Margaret Thatcher was very forcibly removed from office. There were a catalogue of failures identified in the report – however because of the limited amount of time that I have today I will only mention a few.

- Firstly, The permit-to-work system was highly inadequate. If the system had been implemented properly, the initial gas leak never would have occurred.
- Secondly, The Firewalls – had the firewalls also been explosion proof they could have stopped the spread of a fire, which initially caused an explosion.
- Thirdly, Deluge System - a system designed to automatically activate in case of a fire and spray water on it to suppress a fire could not be activated - the managers had turned it off. It was not working for over two years because all the water out lets were blocked because of rust. For over two years Occidental had promised to replace the deluge system with stainless steel piping but this had not been done.
- Fourthly, There was a total lack of safety training.

Neither the workers nor the managers on the platform were adequately trained in emergency procedures.

Evacuation drills were rare, and a full drill had not happened in over three years.

There was a lack of training in inter-platform communication. When the other platforms realized that there was a problem on Piper, they simply assumed that Piper would take care of it. This was because of the scandalous and historical attitude of Occidental Oil Company.

- Fifthly, the audits performed by Occidental were inadequate. Few if any problems were ever discovered, those that were identified, were ignored. For instance, a year before the Piper Alpha disaster a report had identified the hazard of a gas pipeline explosion, however no action was taken to prevent it from happening.

At the end of the public inquiry Lord Cullen made 106 recommendations.

One of these of course was for safety enforcement to become the responsibility of the Health and Safety Executive.

It is unbelievable that at the time of the disaster the enforcement of offshore safety law depended upon the inspectors from the Department of Energy who were in charge of health and safety in the North Sea and were also responsible for production in the North Sea oil fields. The Tory government of that time steadfastly refused since they had been in power to let the Health and Safety Executive be in charge of health and safety in the North sea.

The Secretary of State for energy at that time was Cecil Parkinson and his deputy Peter Morrison never looked at the question of health and safety at work during their time in office. The public inquiry proved that.

It is shocking that despite the damning report by lord Cullen there has never been a prosecution.

A prosecution could have taken place for either health and safety offences or for homicide – against either individuals or the company.

However, Peter Fraser the Lord Advocate at the time of the Piper Alpha disaster in the last week of July 1991 decided that - there was insufficient evidence to convict the companies and individuals in a criminal court.

However I ask you, how can there be insufficient evidence when the public inquiry into the deaths uncovered damning evidence against those who profited at the expense of safety, and more importantly at the expense of 229 workers.

All of the serious and continuous negligence created by Occidental oil company makes up skip loads of evidence that should have been used against Occidental's executive board members by the Crown Office of Scotland. So therefore not to prosecute Occidental's executives was clearly a political decision between the Lord Advocate and all the other Lord Advocates since then, and the Prime ministers of Britain.

I have written several times to the Lord Advocate requesting a meeting to discuss the reasons why he thinks that there is insufficient evidence to justify a prosecution. However I have been ignored .

I once wrote to Mrs Margaret Thatcher and more recently Tony Blair appealing to them to answer questions why those responsible for the Piper Alpha disaster have never been charged.

Since the birth of the Scottish Parliament over 4 years ago I have written to MSP's (Members of Scottish Parliament) requesting that they have an open debate in parliament of the reasons why Occidental directors have not been prosecuted – again my appeals for charges to be brought have fallen mostly on deaf ears.

In my view, it is simply not in the British State's interest to prosecute multi-national oil companies etc who help finance their governments and election campaigns.

However as long as I live, I will continue to ask MSP's, MP's, lawyers, individuals and bona fide organisations to help demand that our Scottish Parliament must debate the Crown Office's criminal refusal to prosecute Occidental oil company.

Thank you for listening to my appeal for justice – please try to help.

Thank you.