



50th Anniversary of Amnesty International Groups in Glasgow
Civic Reception
Satinwood Suite
Glasgow City Chambers
Tuesday 28th October 2025

Deputy Lord Provost Bailie Christy Mearns, Glasgow City Council

Good evening, everyone. On behalf of the Lord Provost and the people of Glasgow, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the City Chambers tonight.

I'm sure you'll agree - this is a truly magnificent building. We are incredibly fortunate to have such fine civic headquarters right in the heart of our City.

If you get the chance, I highly recommend taking one of the guided tours. You'll see the stunning murals that adorn the walls of the banqueting hall Next door, which beautifully illustrate the unique story of Glasgow and its people. They run twice per day, and the best part is, they're completely free!

But tonight, we gather for a very special reason. My friends, it is a great honour to join you all in celebrating this remarkable milestone – the 50th Anniversary of Amnesty International in Glasgow.

50 years is an impressive achievement - that's five decades of dedication, advocacy and meaningful impact. This anniversary is not only a moment to reflect on the past, but a powerful acknowledgment of Amnesty International's enduring commitment to human rights and its support for those whose voices go unheard.

Since the founding of Glasgow's first local Amnesty group in 1975, your organisation has been on an incredible journey of growth. Today, we proudly recognise not only that pioneering group, but also the three active Amnesty groups now operating across the city – all of whom are celebrating this milestone together and represented here tonight.

Amnesty international has long been a beacon of hope in our city, active through national campaigns and community-led initiatives - from fundraising and education to events and partnerships. And it's you—the members, employees and volunteers - who make all of that possible. After all, *people make Glasgow!*

Folks, reaching fifty years is no small feat – it speaks to extraordinary resilience. Over the decades, there will have undoubtedly been challenges, but your ability to adapt and grow is truly commendable.

That's why I was delighted to learn that next month, a commemorative tree will be planted near Kelvingrove to honour your legacy. Accompanied by a special plaque, this tree will stand as a lasting symbol of resilience, strength, and hope in such a beloved area of our City

And what a year to celebrate! We're especially pleased to welcome you during Glasgow's own landmark year – our 850th anniversary. I have no doubt that you'll have lots to reminisce about – 50 years holds a lot of stories - so I won't keep you much longer.

On behalf of the city, we extend our deepest gratitude and warmest congratulations on reaching your golden anniversary. May this milestone inspire greater awareness across Glasgow and be as transformative as the last 50 years.

Please enjoy the city's hospitality this evening. I shall now hand over to Christine from the Glasgow West Amnesty Group. Thank you.

Christine Alison, Glasgow West Amnesty Group

Hello everyone!

It's lovely to see some well kent faces from the past and the present!

I was asked by Claire and Andrew to give a short history of Glasgow West Amnesty International Group.

The group was started in 1975 by a few members of St Mary's Episcopalian Cathedral in Great Western Road. This group included Richard Brown, Gill Young and John and Margaret Gerrard. I'm pleased to say that Gill and John are here this evening along with Lynn Brown, who is Richard's widow. Sadly Richard passed away 22 years ago. He was a stalwart of the Group and has been very much missed.

For many years the group met in St Mary's but in recent years we've been meeting in The Methodist Church in Woodlands Road on the second Thursday of every month at 7.30pm. So store that in your diaries if you fancy joining in.

Around Glasgow there were several other groups: Glasgow City, Glasgow Central, South Side, East End, Milngavie & Bearsden and Paisley. Currently I think we have only three: West, Daytime and Glasgow University.

I joined the group in 1983 and was immediately welcomed with open arms. I remember someone saying "Oh good, a new member, you can take the Urgent Action file." So that was the start of my Amnesty career and I spent the next few years stuffing envelopes with Urgent Action appeals and posting them out to our long list of letter writing volunteers. This was way before the invention of emails!

As well as Urgent Actions, the group was allocated three adopted Prisoners of Conscience to campaign for their release. These prisoners were always from differing political regimes, which was important as Amnesty International had to maintain its political impartiality. The main objectives of Amnesty at that time was to achieve the release of POCs, ensure fair trials for political prisoners and end torture, cruel and degrading treatment and the death penalty.

Over Christmas and New Year, the group has always taken part in the Greetings Card Campaign, now called Write for Rights, and it has become a tradition to sign cards and sip mulled wine at our December meeting. Best meeting of the year!

A further important strand to our work was (and is) fundraising. This is where Richard Brown was in his element. He organised immense book sales; initially we held these in Byres Road using folding tables on the pavement, piled high with boxes of books. Later on, we hired a room in Hillhead library because the weather often got the better of us in Byres Road! I suspect Lynn must have been driven mad by the house being stacked with boxes of books for several weeks before the sale.

Other fundraisers were: pub quizzes, concerts, pub collections, ceilidhs and Comedy Nights. The Comedy nights at The Stand have been taking place annually for over 20 years and continue to this day. They have been a fantastic source of income for Amnesty.

There were two particularly impressive campaigns organised by Hazel Mills and Ann Drummond, both of whom are here this evening. In 1990, when Glasgow was European Capital City of Culture, we worked for the release of three cultural prisoners of conscience:

- Jack Mapanje – a poet from Malawi
- Hong Song Dam – a South Korean artist
- Nguyen Chi Thien – a Vietnamese poet

I think all three were eventually released from prison.

The other campaign was the Freedom Festival in 1995. This was launched with a spectacular Gala Concert in the Kings Theatre and followed by over 100 events in the city linked to the theme of freedom. Again we worked for the release of three cultural prisoners of conscience:

- Hwang Suk-yong – a South Korean writer
- Dr Ma Thida – a doctor and writer from Myanmar
- Manuel Manriquez San Agustin – an indigenous Mexican musician.

The scope of Amnesty's work has expanded since 1995 and there is still lots of campaigning to be done. So if you want to get involved then do come along to our Write for Rights event in Hillhead Library on Sunday 14th December from 12 noon until 4pm. You could sign a few greetings cards and give us a donation for the extortionate cost of postage.

We hope to see you there or perhaps at one of our meetings.

I'll now hand over to Andrew from the Glasgow University Amnesty Group.

Andrew Graham, Glasgow University Amnesty Group

Hello everybody.

My name is Andrew and I am the Treasurer at Glasgow University Amnesty International and I am here tonight speaking on behalf of the society. Our Chairperson Emma apologises and regrets that she cannot be here tonight as she is out of the country.

First of all, we'd like to offer our congratulations to the Glasgow West group for 50 years of fighting human rights injustices.

The Glasgow University Amnesty International group is a student group that has run since 2006 - so we are twenty next year. We're a fifteen person committee with over one hundred registered members.

We've had a great many successes over the years which I am delighted to share with you all this evening. However, whilst tonight is a celebratory event, I do believe it is important to say a short something about the necessity of human rights activism.

Unfortunately, for human rights, the past few years have been challenging to say the least. Across the globe, we've witnessed genocide and war crimes, the rise of the far right, rising discrimination, and restrictions on press freedom and freedom of expression. But, still, I am encouraged by those who choose to resist.

Over the years we've run a number of successful fundraising and campaign events such as letter writing to government officials and prisoners-of-conscience for Write for Rights, our

Jamnesty & AmnesTEA events, and documentary screenings and bake sales.

We've fundraised for a number of charities such as Govan Community Project, Trans Harm Reduction, Abortion Support Network, Women's Aid, the UN Emergency Fund for Women and Girls in Afghanistan, and Medical Aid for Palestine.

We've attended protests for Black Lives Matter, for Pride and for COP26 and climate justice - even running virtual craftivism sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We've ran a number of wide-ranging campaigns on everything from refugee to disability rights, period poverty, buffer zones and reproductive rights, the ongoing persecution of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and Women in Afghanistan, morality police in Iran, to the ongoing apartheid and genocide in Palestine.

On our own campus, we've campaigned against our university's complicity in war crimes, calling for the university to divest in arms companies and to adhere to its statements on ethical investment, as well as campaigning against our university's development of lethal autonomous weapons. We've also called for our university to protect students and adopt the Emily Test charter - an anti-GBV charter.

We've collaborated with a range of other societies on campus such as Lawyers Without Borders, Engineers Without Borders, Students for Choice and the Palestine Society - which have widened our reach. More so, last year, we were a founding group of the University of Glasgow FemCollab - a collaboration of feminist societies on campus who are campaigning on feminist matters on campus. We have also collaborated on campaigns and panel events with a number of other organisations such as Student Action for Refugees, Amicus and Abortion Support Network.

We have also had lots of fun and made longlasting friends at social events - such as our craft events, film screenings, pub quizzes and pub crawls.

This year, we are planning campaigns on Freedom of Expression, Prevent GBV, and Shell's pollution of the Niger Delta. We are also planning to collaborate with more societies and groups to further widen our reach.

Going online during COVID-19 was challenging, however, we've only been expanding since and we hope to keep up momentum into this year - with our recent AmnesTEA open campaigns event being one of our most well-attended.

Over the past few years, we've had committee members be elected to the Amnesty International Student Action Network - representing students across the UK. Some of us have even graduated and gone onto work within human rights - training as human rights barristers or working within the third sector as campaigners. Our society is what it is thanks to all our members and the many other wonderful volunteer activists that we work with.

We are delighted to celebrate with you all tonight.

I'd like now to pass over to Graham from the Glasgow Daytime Amnesty group.

Graham Skellern – Amnesty Glasgow Daytime Group

I am Graham Skellern a member of the AI Glasgow Daytime Group. On these occasions when we celebrate an anniversary, we usually look at the past, present and future. I will start in my past.

My first recollection of the beginning of Amnesty was in the 1960's with the "Prisoner of

Conscience” campaigns which comprised adverts in the media, including black and white television, which consisted of a white wax candle with barbed wire around. This as we know was transformed into the Amnesty logo we know today. My involvement with an Amnesty Group was the West one which met in St Mary’s Cathedral, Great Western Road. At my first meeting I remember being given writing paper, which might have been airmail paper, and asked to write a letter relating to a prisoner who was in goal for protesting about the lack of human rights in their country. This practice, for me, is one of the most important activities of Amnesty. The cases called Urgent Actions are researched and authenticated by Amnesty before being publicized.

Over the last 50 years the Glasgow groups, of which there used to be six, must have written thousands of letters urging for the release of prisoners. We are the “voice for the voiceless.” Today we are thankful to those who have kept the Amnesty flame alight in Glasgow and that letters/emails are still written, a task that is still important for me. Today we must remember that Prisoners of Conscience, sadly, will always be with us, and we must choose the most effective means of bringing their plight to the authorities.

However, the question, as we move from analogue to digital is, what form will future campaigns (Urgent Actions, Write for Rights) take? Amnesty’s remit has developed from not dealing with individual cases but campaigning for minority groups, green policy implementation, political policies etc.

Are we still as the title of the new Dalai Lama’s new book the “Voice for the Voiceless”?

Helen Horton, Section Board Chair, Amnesty International UK

Text from Helen’s speech will be added to this document as soon as it has been received.

Claire Low, Chair, Glasgow West Amnesty Group

Ok, before we get to mingling, I’m here to say a few thank yous!

Thank you to Deputy Lord Provost Christy for making the time to honour us with this beautiful civic reception.

...to Helen for showing the vital link between the work of central Amnesty UK and our local groups.

...to Christine, Graham and Andrew for giving us insights into the myriad ways in which Glasgow’s local groups have worked for human rights, both in our local and international communities.

And to all of you for your commitment to Amnesty, not just on this cold, dark night but in the many months and years you’ve all been part of this great movement. Some of you have been part of Amnesty for longer than my lifetime, and I am in awe of your endless hope and activism. I can’t wait to chat with you and hear your Amnesty memories.

While the last 50 years wouldn’t have happened without all of you, tonight couldn’t have happened without this man here, Andrew. Beyond the around 437 meetings, phone calls and emails he’s had to send out and reply to to get us all here, in this room, on schedule, he’s also spent many hours sorting through this beautiful archive of 50 years of Amnesty Glasgow local groups’ work.

We hope it brings back many rewarding memories and inspires you to continue the work. It embodies Amnesty's collaborative, broad approach to activism and is a reminder that there is space for all folk within Amnesty's work - if you want to shout through a loudspeaker and carry our banner at a multicoloured mass march, host a stall and gather petitions, organise a film screening with a panel discussion, or quietly sit in a cosy room with a group of warm-hearted folk writing letters, Amnesty invites you to take up space here and there, because at a time when the very right to do even these things is under unprecedented threat, we must join hands everywhere.

For those who've lost touch with your local groups, on the archive display you can see information about our meeting times and places, or just chat with any of the speakers to find out more about how to get involved. We've got a few more events coming up to celebrate our 50th year - the tree planting in Kelvingrove in November, and Write for Rights events in our local libraries in December. We hope you can join in!

A huge thank you again to everybody involved in this evening, and I hope to see some of you here in 50 years!

For now, let's enjoy some canapés and reminiscing!

Tree Planting Ceremony – 21st November 2025, Kelvingrove

Andrew McGuire, Glasgow West Group

As the Deputy Lord Provost noted, 2025 represents fifty years of Amnesty having an active presence within Glasgow.

Earlier this year, when it dawned on us that this was our Golden Jubilee, we contacted the Council asking if they'd facilitate a tree planting. They immediately wrote back and said yes they would and, by the way, would we also like to have a Civic Reception!

That was a very pleasant surprise and a good way of recognising the work of Amnesty volunteers in Glasgow across the past fifty years – both current activists, and those who've input in the past, including a number who, sadly, are no longer with us.

But I also want to emphasise that the purpose in celebrating, is not about blowing our own trumpet. It's about using the occasion to publicise the work of Amnesty, to encourage new volunteers and perhaps reignite the flame in some of our wonderful former activists, who've played such an important role over many years.

The principal objective of Amnesty is to operate as an independent global movement, whose ultimate purpose is to promote human rights and to end abuses of human rights.

A key mechanism for that, is the thousands of ordinary Amnesty members who volunteer to write letters & emails, organise campaigns, raise funds - and raise awareness of injustices that are taking place around the world.

This includes campaigning for people that have been detained for their beliefs, often on spurious, trumped-up charges - and often without access to legal representation or a fair hearing.

One of the things we did this year was to review the archive material from across the decades, some of which was on display at the Civic Reception last month. I think that material is a testament to the countless hours of work that the Amnesty volunteers in Glasgow have put in.

One letter, in particular, within the archive hit home to me. It was from 2004, written on airmail paper, and it came from a Peruvian teacher and trade unionist named Elmer Vasquez. He'd been arbitrarily detained, accused of treason and forced - under torture - to sign a statement incriminating himself. He was then sentenced to life imprisonment. The letter he sent referenced the joy and the comfort he'd experienced from realising that people were both aware of and cared about the injustice that had been put upon him. His letter stated he'd received 1,524 letters from Amnesty supporters around the world.

Quite a number of the archive documents also reflect the collaboration that's taken place between Amnesty and the Council, through joint events and supported activities. Amongst that, there are examples of the interaction of Human Rights and the Arts, particularly around the time of the Year of Culture in 1990; And also the work of the 'Amnesty Freedom Festival', which took place in the City over a number of months in 1995 and into '96. These events raised thousands of pounds that went towards supporting Amnesty's work and helped bring greater awareness of human rights abuses around the world.

The Council has also been active in hosting former prisoners of conscience that have been released following campaigning by the Glasgow Amnesty Groups. There are photographs within the archive of an artist called Hong Song Dam. He'd taken part in an uprising against the then military dictatorship in his native South Korea and the prints he produced highlighted atrocities committed by the regime. Similarly, a Malawian poet called Jack Mapanje, had been imprisoned because he published a collection of writings that was critical of the Malawi Government. Upon their release, the Council hosted each of these prisoners of conscience, in turn, at the City Chambers when they came to Glasgow to thank those who'd campaigned on their behalf.

Looking back, there have been significant advances in recognising and securing basic human rights. But we obviously can't be complacent. All around the world today, including on our own doorstep, new challenges arise. Who would have thought that, in 2025, a key campaigning priority for Amnesty in the UK would be Protecting the Right to Protest? The task of defending human rights is an ongoing fight and the volunteers of Amnesty will continue to play a key part in that.

Over the past five decades, the number of local Amnesty groups and the number of active volunteers has waxed and waned. But for 50 years now, there has been a continuous presence within Glasgow. With all the options and distractions available to people, that in itself is quite an achievement. We should be rightly proud of that.

On behalf of the Glasgow Amnesty Groups, I'd like to thank the City Council and, in particular, the Deputy Lord Provost for, once again, supporting us with this event today. We really do appreciate it.

As a final comment, I want to briefly say something about the enduring symbol of Amnesty International; the emblem that is integral to the new plaque commissioned for today's tree planting ceremony. For me, the Flame in Barbed Wire represents hope. Peter Benenson, who established Amnesty in 1961 said: "When I first lit the Amnesty Candle, I had in mind the old Chinese proverb 'It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness'."

Let's make sure we continue to keep that flame burning brightly in Glasgow. Thank you.