

# **SPEECHES**

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Speeches by Charles Bradlaugh

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**CHARLES BRADLAUGH**

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BY  
CHARLES BRADLAUGH.



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## SPEECHES BY CHARLES BRADLAUGH.

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FOUR SPEECHES DELIVERED AT THE BAR OF  
THE HOUSE OF COMMONS DURING THE  
PARLIAMENTARY STRUGGLE.

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**First Speech: June 23rd, 1880.**

MR. SPEAKER,—I have to ask the indulgence of every member of this House while, in a position unexampled in the history of this House, I try to give one or two reasons why the resolution which you have read to me should not be enforced.

If it were not unbecoming I should appeal to the traditions of the House against the House itself, and I should point out that in none of its records, so far as my poor reading goes, is there any case in which this House has judged one of its members in his absence, and taken away from that member the constitutional right he has. ('Hear, hear.') There have been members against whom absolute legal disqualification has been urged. No such legal disqualification is ventured to be urged by any member of this House against myself. But even those members have been heard in their places; those members have been listened to before the decision was taken against them; and I ask that this House shall not be less just to myself than it has always been to every one of its members. ('Hear, hear.')

Do you tell me I am unfit to sit amongst you? ('Hear, hear,' and 'Order, order'.) The more reason, then, that this

House should show the generosity which judges show to a criminal, and allow every word he has to say to be heard. But I stand here, Sir, as no criminal. I stand here as the chosen of a constituency of this country, with my duty to that constituency to do. I stand here, Sir—if it will not be considered impertinent to put it so—with the most profound respect for this House, of which I yet hope and mean to form a part, and on whose traditions I should not wish to cast one shadow of reproach. I stand here returned duly; no petition against my return; no impeachment of that return. I stand here returned duly, ready to fulfil every form that this House requires, ready to fulfil every form that the law permits this House to require, ready to do every duty that the law makes incumbent upon me.

I will not in this presence argue whether this House has or has not the right to set its decision against the law, because I should imagine that even the rashest of those who spoke against me would hardly be prepared to put in the mouth of one whom they consider too advanced in politics an argument so dangerous as that might become. I speak within the limits of the law, asking for no favor from this House for myself or for my constituents, but asking the merest justice which has always been accorded to a member of the House. ('Hear, hear,' and 'Order'.) I have to ask indulgence lest the memory of some hard words which have been spoken in my absence should seem to give to what I say a tone of defiance, which it is far from my wish should be there at all; and I am the more eased because although there were words spoken which I had always been taught English gentlemen never said in the absence of an antagonist without notice to him, yet there were also generous and brave words said for one who is at present, I am afraid, a source of trouble and discomfort and hindrance to business. I measure the generous words against the others, and I will only make one appeal through you, Sir, which is, that if the reports be correct that the introduction of other names came with mine in the heat of passion and the warmth of debate, the gentleman who used those words, if such there were, will remember that he was wanting in chivalry, because, while I can answer for

myself, and am able to answer for myself, nothing justified the introduction of any other name beside my own to make a prejudice against me. (Cheers, 'Question,' and 'Order'.)

I fear lest the strength of this House, judicially exercised as I understand it to be—with infrequency of judicial exercise—that the strength of this House makes it forget our relative positions. At present I am pleading at its bar for justice. By right it is there [pointing to the seats] I should plead. It is that right I claim in the name of those who sent me here. No legal disqualification before my election, or it might have been made the ground of petition; no legal disqualification since my election—not even pretended.

It is said: "You might have taken the oath as other members did". I could not help, when I read that, Sir, trying to put myself in the place of each member who said it. I imagined a member of some form of faith who found in the oath words which seemed to him to clash with his faith, but still words which he thought he might utter, but which he would prefer not to utter if there were any other form which the law provided him; and I asked myself whether each of those members would not then have taken the form which was most consonant with his honor and his conscience. If I have not misread, some hon. members seem to think that I have neither honor nor conscience. Is there not some proof to the contrary in the fact that I did not go through the form, believing that there was another right open to me? ('Hear, hear,' and 'Order'.) Is that not some proof that I have honor and conscience?

Of the gentlemen who are now about to measure themselves against the rights of the constituencies of England, I ask what justification have they for that measurement? They have said that I thrust my opinions on the House. I hold here, Sir, the evidence of Sir Thomas Erskine May, and I can find no word of any opinion of mine thrust upon the House at all. I have read—it may be that the reports misrepresent—that the cry of "Atheist" has been raised from that side. [Pointing to the Opposition side.] No word of all mine before the committee put in any terms those theological or anti-theological opinions in