

Baroness Catherine Ashton of Upholland, Hon DLitt

Monday 21 July 2025

Orator: Sir David Normington, Chair of Council

Chancellor

Our honorary graduand this afternoon is the former Chancellor of the University, Baroness Catherine Ashton – Cathy Ashton to her friends. It is a great pleasure to welcome you back to Warwick and to be able to say thank you in person for your wonderful service to this university.

If those of you graduating today had been receiving your degrees a year ago, you would very likely have been receiving it from Baroness Ashton. She was our Chancellor between 2017 and 2024. We calculate that in that time she presided over 64 graduation ceremonies and personally conferred degrees upon some 20,500 students. And having watched many of those ceremonies, I can vouch for the fact that every single one of those recipients felt acknowledged and congratulated in a very warm and personal way.

Being Chancellor of a University is a largely ceremonial role but it is important because every Chancellor represents that University and symbolises what it cares about and stands for at a point in time.

Baroness Ashton was not just our sixth Chancellor, she was the first woman Chancellor of the University of Warwick. It seems incredible to be saying this in 2025, particularly when we now have our second woman Chancellor; but it really is the case that before Cathy Ashton all the Chancellors back to 1965 had been men. We even had to redesign our ceremonial robes, which were heavy and ornate and clearly designed for men.

Secondly, Cathy Ashton was appointed as Chancellor after a hugely impressive career in national and international politics and diplomacy. In 2008 she became a Trade Commissioner in the European Commission in Brussels.

And in 2009 she was appointed as the European Union's Foreign Policy Chief and Vice President of the European Commission – a reminder that there was a time not long ago when the UK really punched its weight in the EU. As the first ever person –and therefore the first ever woman - to occupy that position, she helped to define that role and demonstrate what was possible if European countries worked together on foreign policy. Between 2009 and 2014 she tackled some of the world's most difficult foreign policy challenges, negotiating a peace settlement between Serbia and Kosovo, working with President Obama and Hilary Clinton on the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and leading EU recovery plans for devastating natural disasters like the Haiti earthquake and the Japanese tsunami. She earned a reputation for quiet, determined diplomacy and getting things done. She was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize by both the US House of Representatives and the European Parliament for her truly remarkable work in Serbia and Kosovo.

Of course, it was not an accident that someone with this international reputation and perspective was appointed as our Chancellor in 2017 in the wake of the Brexit vote. Cathy Ashton's appointment came to symbolise our determination, which continues to this day, to look outwards to the world, to build our international links, to grow our partnerships with European universities and to continue to be a truly international university.

But thirdly, I first met Cathy when she became a Government Minister in the Department for Education in 2001, responsible among other things for early years education and Sure Start. What I saw then was a deep commitment to the transformative power of education and to equality and inclusion. Those commitments to widening participation, to social justice and to inclusion and equality of opportunity are the golden threads, which run through her life and career. They are the passions, which brought her into the UK Labour Government in 2001 and characterised her work both in the Department of Education, in the Ministry of Justice and in the House of Lords. And they are the passions, which she has shared with this University.

We have heard her speak many times from this platform about the importance of extending opportunities to those who might struggle to reach university, speaking from her own experience as the first woman in her family to go to university and as a Minister responsible for education. She has often reminded us all, particularly those leaving this university with your impressive degrees, of your responsibilities to extend a hand of support and friendship to those who follow you and who may not have your advantages. It is no coincidence that her time as Chancellor has coincided with a huge change in the diversity of the student population at this university and an enormous growth in the financial help and support available to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and localities.

Thank you, Cathy, for standing up as Chancellor for some of the most important things we believe in here at Warwick; internationalism, diversity and inclusion, above all the ability of education to change lives. Thank you for being a good friend to me. It has been great to work with you again. Thank you for all the hard work at those 64 graduations – for all those thousands of hands shaken, for all the kind words offered. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your service to Warwick as its sixth and first woman Chancellor.

Chancellor: in the name of the Senate I present to you for admission to the Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, Baroness Ashton of Upholland.