

**WARWICK**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

**Ms Christiana Figueres** Hon DSc

Oration by Professor David Mond  
Climate Change Module Co-ordinator, Department of Mathematics



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Man-made climate change is the greatest threat facing the world today. Rising temperatures caused by carbon emissions are melting glaciers, burning forests, bleaching coral reefs, and raising sea levels. For decades, climate conference after climate conference failed to agree meaningful emissions reductions.

In Paris in December 2015, this changed. The 195 participating countries finally did agree. More than to any other person, credit for this goes to our guest today. As Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, she laid the groundwork for the Paris agreement. We are delighted and honoured to welcome to today's degree congregation, Ms Christiana Figueres.

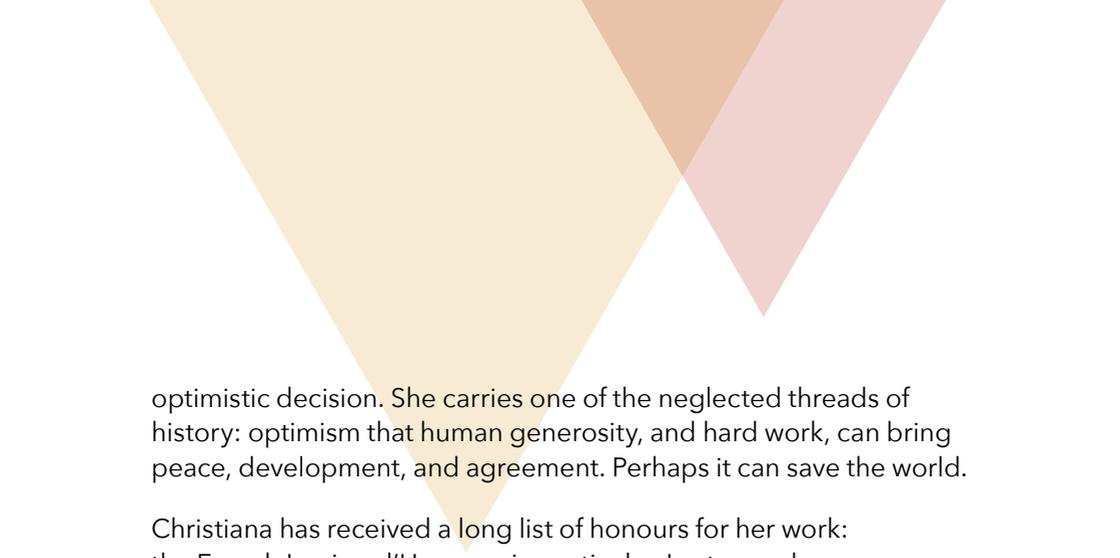
Born in Costa Rica, Christiana has a Master's in Anthropology from LSE, and wide experience in institutional development in Costa Rica and internationally. She has served in many capacities in international climate negotiation since 1995. She became Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC in 2010, six months after the failure of the Copenhagen conference.

Many factors work against climate agreement. The benefit of any action you or I take to limit emissions is shared across the world, but we alone bear its cost; reducing emissions means forgoing mankind's most deeply embedded technology, fire; climate change is imperceptibly slow, and so can be plausibly denied. Add to this the mistrust between the Global North, rich and developed, responsible for most past emissions, and the Global South, anxious to catch up and share the North's opulence. The problem of reaching agreement sometimes looked insuperable. A binding treaty seemed the only way, but no-one was willing to be bound.

To this impasse Christiana brought something new. Optimism and trust. The belief that if you ask the best of people, they will give it. Her negotiation strategy was to ask each country independently to offer what it could, with no attempt to determine what each should offer. This freedom changed everything. But it also entailed a huge amount of very hard work, over the six years from Copenhagen to Paris, convincing the world's nations that they could trust one another to solve this problem. A role requiring exceptional energy, powers of persuasion, and faith in humanity. We are very fortunate that someone with these gifts was available to take it on.

The work is not over. The pledges made at Paris, though a giant step forward, are not sufficient to achieve the reductions we need. But they have already accelerated technological development which has reduced the price of renewable energy to a point where it competes with fossil fuels. Few predicted this, or incorporated it into their NDCs. The Paris treaty allows for this by ensuring that every five years, the NDCs are revisited. The world has a chance again.

In case this seems naive, let me add a story from my own experience. I lived in Colombia in the 1970s and 80s - a country racked by violence, like most of its neighbours - Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala. One country escaped this, Costa Rica, whose president abolished the armed forces in 1948, pledging the money saved to health, education and the environment. Since then it has had no wars and no military coup, because it has no military. Today it is one of only three countries in the world whose measures to tackle climate change are judged 'sufficient' by the authoritative organisation Climate Action Tracker. I was thrilled to learn that Christiana is the daughter of the president who in 1948 took that



optimistic decision. She carries one of the neglected threads of history: optimism that human generosity, and hard work, can bring peace, development, and agreement. Perhaps it can save the world.

Christiana has received a long list of honours for her work: the French Legion d'Honneur in particular. Last year she was recognised as seventh of the world's 50 greatest leaders by *Fortune* magazine. I could go on.

Warwick is an optimistic university, run on collegiality and collaboration. It is strongly committed to climate action at the local level. It is achieving ambitious emissions reductions, and its new department of Global Sustainable Development offers joint degrees with nine other departments. It is immensely proud to associate itself with Christiana Figueres.

Provost, in the name of the Senate, I present for admission to the degree of Doctor of Science, *honoris causa*, Ms Christiana Figueres.