

Oration for Peter Harris

To be delivered 17 July 2018, 11am by Professor Colin Sparrow

Chancellor

One of the most significant and uplifting events of the late 20th century was the transition of South Africa from apartheid to democracy. In this process, our honorary graduand, PETER HARRIS, played a notable part; it is a great pleasure to introduce him this morning.

Peter is already a Warwick graduate. Born in Durban, he completed his LLM here in 1989. His legal career has from the beginning been concerned with human rights and social justice. On gaining his LLB in South Africa, he took up a Fellowship in 1981 at the Legal Resources Centre in Johannesburg – a public interest law centre providing free legal services to the vulnerable and marginalised. He went on to co-found the law firm, Cheadle, Thompson and Haysom which specialised in human rights and represented in the ‘80s and early ‘90s a large proportion of Nelson Mandela’s first cabinet. In the late ‘80s, he was called upon to defend four young ANC activists arrested for a string of political murders, in what has been called ‘the final showpiece apartheid treason trial’. Peter’s account of the proceedings, *A Just Defiance*, published in 2008, won the *Sunday Times*’ Alan Paton Award and the South African Booksellers’ Choice

Award. Peter's work on the case is credited with laying the foundations for the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In the early 1990s, Peter was seconded to work on the National Peace Accord established in 1991 as a response to escalating political violence, and offering a participatory process of mediation and monitoring; Peter was responsible for brokering a number of agreements between warring political factions. This experience led directly to his hands-on involvement in South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. Peter was called upon to head the Monitoring Directorate of the Independent Electoral Commission, responsible for ensuring the freeness and fairness of the election. He has graphically described this mammoth task in his book, *Birth*, published to critical acclaim in 2010: the Commission had three and a half months to gear up an entire electoral machinery, working against a background of extreme

violence. His book ends with Nelson Mandela being sworn in as President and the statement: 'It is history. It cannot be stopped.'

Following his work in South Africa, Peter was appointed Director of Programmes at the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance in

Stockholm, becoming responsible for all electoral and conflict resolution programmes worldwide. He has led a project team working on judicial reform in Sierra Leone and has advised on this, on labour reform and on the conduct on elections in the former Yugoslavia, Mexico, Haiti, Guyana, Ethiopia and Tanzania. He has recently returned to significant mediation roles in South Africa – in the bitter 2013 disputes on wages and conditions in the gold mining sector, and as leader of a team drafting the National Language Policy. He is currently facilitating, at the request of the Minister of Communication, a way forward between many parties in the challenging Digital Terrestrial Television Migration process. He has encouraged our own work here at Warwick and has supported the development of our Warwick in Africa Programme. Every summer we train some of our best students to be volunteer teachers and enable them to teach Maths and English in some of the poorest schools across Africa, including the South African townships where Peter knows from his personal experience that good quality education is so desperately needed.

We honour Peter Harris this morning for his life-long commitment to conflict resolution and human rights, and especially for his contribution to the establishment of a truly democratic South Africa.

Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, PETER HARRIS.