

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP DIALOGUES

Insights and Inspirations from Change Leaders



Climate Champion

CHRISTIANA FIGUERES

Christiana Figueres was appointed as the executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on May 17, 2010. She has been involved in climate-change negotiations since 1995 as a member of the Costa Rican negotiating team, as a representative of Latin America and the Caribbean on the executive board of the Clean Development Mechanism, and as vice president of the Bureau of the Conference of the Parties.

Figueres began her life of public service as minister counselor at the embassy of Costa Rica in Bonn, Germany, in 1982. She then served as director of international cooperation in the Ministry of Planning in Costa Rica and as chief of staff to the minister of agriculture. From 1994 to 1996, she was director of the Technical Secretariat, Renewable Energy in the Americas (REIA), and in 1995, she founded the Center for Sustainable Development of the Americas (CSDA), a nonprofit think tank for climate-change policy and capacity building, which she directed until 2003.

A widely published author, Figueres has also been a frequent advisor to the private sector on how to play a leadership role in climate-change mitigation. She holds a master's degree in anthropology from the London School of Economics and a certificate in organizational development from Georgetown University. Her father, José Figueres Ferrer, served three terms as president of Costa Rica. He is often referred to as the founder and father of modern democracy in his nation; his notable accomplishments include the dissolution of the Costa Rican military. Her mother, Karen Olsen Beck, served as the Costa Rican ambassador to Israel and was later elected to the Costa Rican legislative assembly.

Secretary Figueres was the keynote speaker at the 46th commencement ceremonies at the University of Massachusetts Boston on May 30, 2014, where she received a doctorate of laws, honoris causa, for her "advocacy on behalf of our planet and its most vulnerable populations." This brief is adapted from two interviews with Figueres – by Maria Ivanova, associate professor and co-director of the Center for Governance and Sustainability at UMass Boston in May 2014, and by Ira Jackson, dean of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, for WUMB Radio's Commonwealth Journal in April 2013.

Christiana, you were just honored with an honorary degree and were our commencement speaker at UMass Boston. What does this mean to you as a person, as an official in the environmental field, and as a public servant?

It is very moving to me. As I mentioned at the beginning of the commencement speech, my grandfather always wanted me to get a PhD. He meant a real one, of course, so I have cheated a little bit here, but he would probably forgive me for that. So it was a meaningful experience. What was particularly moving, though, was the spirit that reigned in the commencement ceremony: We heard so many stories of absolutely fantastic, inspirational young people who have not let life get them down, but rather have really taken the challenges that life has given them in stride and kept on going. These people are now true beacons of inspiration for themselves, for their families, and for their peers. So today certainly renewed my hope in the next generation.

You have the top UN position – arguably the top global position in any organization – in the climate-change field. As President John F. Kennedy once said, with great power comes great responsibility. What made you decide to accept this daunting responsibility?

More than power, it definitely is responsibility. The power here lies with the nation-states. It is they who have to make the decisions. All we do in the climate secretariat is support the climate analysis that governments need to make their decisions. It is very much a supportive and technical responsibility that we have. For myself, what made me accept this responsibility is actually a personal story. When I was very young, my parents took me to a



The golden toad of Monteverde, Costa Rica.

rainforest in Costa Rica where there was a little golden toad that was endemic to that rainforest. I saw these little toads during their mating season, which was a spectacular sight. They looked like little golden coins. By the time my daughters were the same age as I was when I saw them, the species had disappeared. It had gone extinct. So in my lifetime I have already seen a species disappear. When I found out about this, I asked the scientists in Monteverde what was going on. At the time they told me that we do not know exactly what it was, but they said there was something about the temperature of the surface of the rainforest that affected the extremely sensitive skin of the animals and this resulted in a fungus that they could not survive. At that time nobody was calling anything climate change, but I realized – oh my goodness – that the planet that I inherited from my parents was being visibly, measur-



Christiana Figueres with schoolchildren in Durban, South Africa, in 2011.

ably diminished and it occurred to me that this was huge with respect to the planet that I am passing on to my children. At that point I said, “I cannot just sit back and not do something about it.” So here we are many years later.

We need hope if we are going to tackle the wicked problem that is climate change. At the commencement ceremony at UMass Boston, you had at your fingertips 4,000 graduating students and you addressed them as peers, as agents of choice. How would you suggest that those of us in academia empower young people? What can we do to aid you in your role at the global level?

One of the most difficult things to work on when it comes to climate change is that it seems both a daunting challenge and a challenge that is very far away. It seems far away in time, in geography, in impacts. And none of that is true. The fact is we are seeing the impacts now – in the United States and in every other country. So the most difficult thing is how you motivate individuals to commit themselves to making changes. The easy thing is for people to say that climate change is the responsibility of governments and the governments need to take care of it. There is an assumption that as citizens we do not have any responsibility. What I was trying to do during the commencement speech was to draw the connection among all

of these dots and to bring it down to the individual level. I wanted to impress upon the students that this is not a responsibility we can export to governments or to large corporations or to city governments. This is a responsibility we all have to share and it does require behavioral change on all of our parts. It is not easy, but frankly we do not have any options. If we want to have any sense of integrity, we need behavior change. We have already created a mess for our kids, but if people do not change their behavior it will become a mess that they may not be able to get out of. Right now we still have the option of managing the impacts if we stay under the two degrees Celsius increase in temperature. If we do not get to global peaking of emissions in this decade and to global climate neutrality in the second half of the century, the effects will be unmanageable.

And it is your job now to prod governments to get to that point, is it not?

Yes, but not just governments – prod corporations, prod civil society, prod companies.... I never stand up and speak without challenging everyone to do more. During the Conference of the Parties we had in Durban in 2011, I went one afternoon to see a little theater performance that the local school was putting on for fourth, fifth, and sixth

graders. Part of the piece was a song that they kept on repeating throughout the show. The lyrics from that song stay with me to this day: “Do more, do more, do more. And when you have done everything you can, do more...”

This is indeed the message you sent today at UMass Boston – we are educating the people that are going to go out and do more. You referred to the legacy of John W. McCormack, the former Speaker of the House of the US Congress after whom the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at UMass Boston is named. What strikes you about his legacy in the context of the climate-change narrative?

What strikes me about McCormack’s legacy is that he saw challenges from so many different perspectives. When he was shaping the social contract of the last century, he looked at things kaleidoscopically. He saw that issues like social security and environmental protection – all of our major societal challenges, really – are all different aspects of the same challenge, which is to build that network that will create stability for society. It is exactly the same with climate change. It is so multidimensional and so multifaceted and so multi-agenda, actually. It is not a sector. You have to see it through its many dimensions. This complexity is also an opportunity, though, because everybody can approach it from their own perspective: whether you are in health policy or in national security, whether you are in infrastructural development or in energy. It doesn’t matter which sector you are in. You have the opportunity and the responsibility to deal with the new reality.

What is the role of government in that kaleidoscopic context?

The role of governments is very clear. The government is the captain of the boat. They absolutely need to set the direction. The direction has to be towards low carbon and it has to be set in a timely fashion. But the governments are not down in the engine room. The engine room is provided by the private sector, by researchers, by civil society, and everybody who is actually taking the task seriously and taking on the actions themselves. The governments still have the responsibility of setting the direction, though. They have done this, but not with a loud enough voice. Right now they have decided they are not going to allow the global average temperature to rise over two degrees Celsius. But frankly, when you look at the goal that they have set and you look at the balance between signal and noise, there is still a lot of noise around that signal and they need to give a much clearer, much more powerful signal. That is what we are working toward as we seek to craft



Ira Jackson (left), dean of the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies, interviews Christiana Figueres for Commonwealth Journal at WUMB Radio.

an agreement before the 2015 Conference of the Parties in Paris.

Your secretariat must be working now night and day in preparation for the COPs in Lima and Paris. What is it like to work in a setting like that towards these big goals? What kind of people do you attract?

We are incredibly privileged in the secretariat. We have over 500 people who come from many different walks of life and many different backgrounds from almost a hundred countries around the world – all of whom are devoting their lives to supporting the evolution of climate-change policy. Each one of these people is focused on a particular slice of the pie for which they are responsible. It is an incredibly committed, capable, and hardworking team. They know that the next 18 months will be the most difficult they will ever have. They know they are going to get very little sleep, but they are committed. There are always people who want to join our team or even volunteer with us. There is such a rising awareness of the fact that this really is the problem of the generation, and that we now have 18 months to address it. French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius is the president of the next Conference of the Parties. He came out just two weeks ago in his address to the U.S. Senate and said “we have 500 days left to do this... and if not we are in such trouble.” So that 500-day challenge is the one we take very seriously.

In the run-up to Lima and to Paris, what is your aspiration? What would you like to see come out in Paris?

There have to be three things around the table. One is there have to be very clearly quantified contributions from every single country. That doesn’t mean that the quantity



Figueres (left) and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon championed low-carbon lifestyles riding bamboo bikes made by young women in Ghana.

is going to be the same for each party. Obviously, there has to be differentiation, but contributions have to be quantified and from every single country – whether it is adaptation or mitigation or both, but they have to be there – not at the minimum possible but at the maximum possible. That is critical.

Second, there has to be the recognition that no matter how much effort is being made now, it is pathetically insufficient compared to the challenge that we have. This means the Paris agreement has to be able not only to gather and harvest all the contributions that will be on the table right now, but also to set the path toward global peaking of emissions in this decade and toward global climate neutrality in the second half of the century. This is what the science is very clearly telling us needs to be done: We need a set of short-term targets as well as a global long-term target.

And three, we have to have the pathway in between. We need a monitoring and verification system that is able to tell us whether we are keeping on track. In addition, there needs to be a recognition that this is not just about governments but includes every single part of society.

So all of these elements need to be captured in the agreement that is currently being collectively drafted by the gov-

ernments, and which will be on the table in its draft form by the end of this year at Lima.

What about the Kyoto Protocol? Is it not facing considerable difficulties? What is your plan B?

There is no plan B. Let's just get that out of the way. There is no plan B because we do not have a planet B. We are all on plan A and we are just moving along with plan A.

As for the Kyoto Protocol, it went into its second commitment period as of January 2013 and it will move through its eight-year commitment period, which ends in December 2020. The good thing about the Kyoto Protocol is that it is actually a treasure trove of very stringent rules and regulations that guarantee the environmental integrity of countries' efforts to reduce their emissions. The Kyoto Protocol comes with a huge amount of language related to metrics – measurability, transparency, reporting, and verifying. That is the heart and soul of the environmental integrity of the convention. So that is the good news.

The bad news is that Kyoto only covers 10 to 12% of global emissions and that is completely insufficient. Because of this, sovereign states have actually put into place a separate track that recognizes that we need to cover 100% of global emissions. They will commit to a universal agree-

ment in 2015 that will provide a global framework for how we will deal with global emissions. Countries have already decided that the agreement will take effect in 2020, so there is a dovetail. The second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol runs until 2020, and from there the global agreement starts.

If you could start the process of global climate change governance all over again, what would you do differently?

I would actually do something about our identities as global citizens. Unfortunately, most of us have been brought up as being a member of a small community, or a city, or a municipality, or, at the maximum level, a nation-state. That is very important, and I am extremely proud to be a citizen of Costa Rica, but it is not enough. We also need to think of ourselves as global citizens, and we need to expand the boundaries of our responsibilities. In particular, the boundary of our moral choice has to go beyond the boundary of our individual countries to the planet. We need to understand that we are all in the same boat. We only have one planet. What happens in China has an effect on the United States. What happens in the United States has an effect on Tuvalu. We need to stop thinking as countries that are separated from each other. The fact is that we have huge evidence that globalization is increasingly interlinking us every day and we all have impacts on each other. That is the way we have to solve things. We understand that the negative impacts are there, so we have to put the positive solutions into place at the global scale. So I would actually start by putting in a little mental chip into every child that is born that says, “Yes, I am born here being a proud citizen of my country and I am a global citizen.”

You are from Costa Rica, a small country famous for its enlightened environmental politics. How does your background influence your leadership style?

I am from Costa Rica and I am also from a family that has really dedicated itself throughout generations to ensuring that the most vulnerable are given opportunities they were not born with. So, frankly, all I am doing is taking the values and principles of my family and applying them at the global scale. For example, it is clear that low-lying island states and the least developed countries are: A. the least responsible for having caused climate change, and B. the most vulnerable. I bring to this my family values and principles – I look at the very, very slow progress that we are making in the climate convention and I measure it against how we are improving the possibilities that those who are the most vulnerable will actually have a future in their own land.



Three generations of Figueres women: Christiana with her daughters, Yihana (left) and Naima (right), and her mother, Karen Olsen Beck (far right).

Today, at the commencement ceremony, we had three generations of Figueres women – your mother, you, and your daughters. And at the urging of your daughter you addressed the women in the audience and referred to the importance of women in the challenge against climate change. What would you like to say to young women today who are working in this field and are trying to follow your footsteps?

It is interesting to me that over the many years I have been doing this I have seen a growing number of women come into the field of environment in general, but certainly of climate change. I do not think that this is coincidental. I think there is something in our responsibility toward future generations that makes us very committed to this topic. And yes, it is my daughter who keeps reminding me of this. She is the beacon of the gender issue when it comes to climate change.

In addition to the leadership of women, for which I am very grateful because of the contribution that women can make in particular when it has to do with reaching common ground, I think women are quick to find common ground where there are differences. That type of leadership and capacity for reaching common ground is critical. The other side of the story, which is much more painful, is that women are being disproportionately affected by climate change – particularly in developing countries. So that it is why it is important. As these policies move forward from countries, there need to be contributions – policies, efforts, and activities – that take into account the fact that women have different needs and different possibilities to contribute to the solution. Otherwise, you are putting everything on the



Figueres speaks at Climate Week, New York City, 2014.

shoulders of 50% of the population; and frankly, we can't afford that. We need a hundred percent of the population on this.

What is the main character trait that allows you to perform your managerial and leadership duties? And what was instrumental in developing this trait?

The character trait that allows me to do the work that I have is the character trait that I was not born with but that I am learning on a daily basis. It is patience with a

capital P. And that's extremely difficult, because I am Miss Impatient. I want everything done yesterday or the day before, and that is not the way we are going to solve global problems. This is a building-block process. You have to make sure that the ground you tread is firm and that you use that as the building ground to craft increasingly ambitious solutions. This job has a huge responsibility, but more than anything it has been an incredible experience for me to learn patience.

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

Christiana Figueres

May 30, 2014

Chairman Thomas and members of the Board of Trustees,
President Caret,
Chancellor Motley,
Faculty and staff,
Honorees,
Families and friends, and of course those we honor today,
The UMass Boston Class of 2014

At the outset, may I express how deeply moved I am by this honorary degree. I am truly honored to share a cap and gown with my distinguished fellow recipients, and above all with this extraordinary graduating class.

There are thousands of us gathered here today, but for me there is one person missing, and that is my long-departed Danish grandfather, who had asked me take the difficult path so many of you have taken to a real PhD degree. Fortunately, I suspect his loving nature would have forgiven me for having arrived via the alternative, far less meritorious, route. If Whatsapp could transcend our earthly boundaries, I would send him a photo of today. To all the grandparents in the crowd: your joy is deeply felt.

May I also confess that this is only my second commencement speech. I asked the graduating class I addressed a few years ago to let me know if my first one should be my last so I could warn any future inviting universities. Apparently, I gave them the wrong email address, because here I am again!

Friends, today is a day of many celebrations. I would like to congratulate UMass Boston for 50 years of excellence. It is no small feat to open doors amid the civil rights activism and urban unrest of the 60's, and now be the most diverse public university in New England, with exceptional faculty and innovative research leading the academic world on so many fronts. Beacons of Boston, I salute you!

Now to the real stars of the day: the Class of 2014. What a wonderful sight from up here. I see several thousand caps and gowns. More importantly, I see several thousand agents of choice.

Before I utter my next thought, let me inform you that this year there are 150,000 commencement speeches in the U.S., and 2,000 of them right here in Boston. Granted, the

graduates range from postdocs to kindergarten, but I guarantee every one of the speeches calls for the graduates to "stand up and be counted." It is just not a commencement if it does not remind us of a greater purpose.

So here is our big idea: There is no greater power than the power of choice. The quality of your life, in fact your very life, is determined by the choices you make.

Simple, right? The concept is so simple, it amazes me how many times I have had to learn and relearn it. Frankly, I cannot even claim to remember it on a daily basis. If you, on the other hand, grasp this simple truth and act upon it, you will have mastered the greatest challenge of all, yourself.

Up to this point, many of your decisions have likely been made with much external help. Your parents may have chosen to support your studies over some more obvious pleasures for themselves. Your peers may have influenced you in the direction of a particular class, sport, or maybe even lifetime partner. Your professors may have turned down a much better-paying job in order to have the joy of teaching you. In a sense you have been pushed, pulled, and prodded into the seat you occupy this morning.

But as of today, your decisions are much more your own, based on the choices you make. Without a doubt you will be called upon to make choices at the personal, the public, and even the planetary level. You could see these levels as a ladder of choices, with each rung interconnected with the other.

Starting at the most immediate level – the personal.

Today you celebrate, not just now but late into the night, I hope! Not all days will be like today. There will be days when you are knocked down by life, by events big and small. You have a choice. Stay on the floor and lick your wounds, or get back up, learn from the hit, and grow stronger. That choice determines who you are as a person.

Today you will be congratulated by all whom you know. Tomorrow you will be criticized by some, betrayed or deeply hurt by one you love. You have a choice. React out of anger or revenge, or take the high road, knowing we all carry sad-



Figueres delivers the commencement address at UMass Boston on May 30, 2014.

ness and pain, and everyone needs our patience and compassion. That choice defines how you walk the path of life.

The next level on the ladder – the public – is about your choices when you engage with your fellow citizens and the world, your public persona.

Today you may or may not know exactly what you are going to do tomorrow. If you do, that's great. If you don't, don't panic. We all discover our path one step at a time. In the end, which career you choose and what skills you develop to put to the service of others is less important than making those decisions based on the intentional choice to discover the fullness of yourself. That choice marks the depth with which you engage in the world.

And that brings me to the top rung of the ladder – the planetary level – the choice about what kind of planet you want to have and what kind of planet you want to leave for those who will graduate decades after you. You may think that is not a choice you want or need to make, but I am here to tell you that actually, that choice is by now unavoidable.

Class of 2014...you may or may not be aware of this, but right now, at this very moment, mankind is deciding what kind of planet you and your children will have, what kind of

world you will live in, and you have a say in that decision.

There are two paths. One is a path of rising temperatures, rising insecurity, and rising economic instability. The other is a path where a stable environment sustains growth over generations.

I am of course talking about the choice we are collectively making about our response to climate change. I am sure many of you had to Google me on your very smart phones this morning because you had no idea who was behind that strange name on today's program. So it should be no surprise that I talk to you about climate change.

What may surprise you is the fact that climate change is no longer a threat: it is your new reality. The last time I was on this campus I spoke about climate change as a wicked problem. I assure you it has become no less wicked.

The science is clear and ever more sobering. We have only very limited time to transition to a low-carbon growth path. Bending the curve of greenhouse gas emissions must happen this decade, and the trend must take us to global climate neutrality in the second half of the century. A tall order from where we stand today.



Figueres with UMass Boston's Provost Winston Langley (left) and Chancellor J. Keith Motley (right), and UMass president Robert Caret (far right).

The good news, however, is that increasing numbers of people are realizing that with the right choices in a timely fashion, we can construct a world where energy is clean, growth is sustainable, and opportunities abound.

Collectively, we can choose that future, and individually you will make choices at all three rungs of the choice ladder: personal, public, and planetary.

At a personal level, you can choose to be part of the solution by examining and reducing your own carbon footprint. You may be surprised at the results.

- Eating with conscience, eliminating food waste, or adopting a vegetarian diet can be great for your health and for the earth;
- Walking, cycling, and using public transport and next-gen electric and alternative fuel vehicles are a functional and fun way to reduce emissions; and
- Voting for leaders who believe in science and technology enables a nimble response to challenges and ensures opportunity for you and for the future.

But remember every purchase you make is a vote in the mega financial system, and that system is in no small measure running the world.

At a public level you also have choices, many revolving around where your career takes you. Wherever you find yourself in the coming years as doctors, lawyers, investors, politicians, business leaders, you will be confronted with the already unavoidable impacts of a changing climate, and I call upon you to put your weight behind ambitious and responsible solutions, because there are many.

Take this university as a mini model of a country.

Imagine this entire campus run on unlimited energy harnessed efficiently from the sun, wind, and tides, right there! It is possible – you can either make it happen or you can push for it.

Imagine the Campus Center and the new Integrated Sciences Complex producing their own energy and learning to maximize student comfort while keeping overhead costs low.

Imagine energy stored personally, freeing you from that mess of cables and chargers – except the cable to plug in your car, of course. Either help develop the technology, or as consumers demand that they be developed and put on the market.

Imagine living in a city where buildings are engineered to catch water, grow food, generate electricity, and produce



Figueres and UMass Boston associate professor Maria Ivanova.

biofuels. It is already happening elsewhere; make it happen here!

Believe it or not, all of these choices, while made at the private and public levels, are actually also choices at the planetary level. What you as a generation buy, what you eat, how you get around, how you choose to exercise your profession and your consumer power, and who you choose to lead you in government...they are all fundamentally planetary choices because the implications ripple so deeply across economies and the social networks that effect change.

Now, if that is not enough for you at the planetary level, please do join me and many others who work on these issues from the global policy perspective. There you would be helping to bring 195 completely unique countries

together for a common and urgent cause. I do warn you that it is a job with very little sleep, but of course, that is a skill at which you excel!

Graduates, no matter which career path you choose, no matter where you live or who you live with, you will live with the reality of a changing climate, with all its social and economic consequences.

If each of you makes the right choices now, you will manage those consequences and enjoy an exciting world of new technologies and boundless possibilities. If we collectively make the right choices now, we increase well-being worldwide. That is the world we want. That is the world to choose.

Class of 2014, as you leave the Campus Center Lawn today, may you remember that you have the greatest power of all: the power of choice, which will determine who you are, how you engage with the world, and in fact, what kind of a world you will have. Do not treat this power lightly. Claim your power of choice at all levels: personal, public, and planetary.

Many of those choices will be difficult, many of them will require courage, and many of them will call for your higher sense of purpose and determination. But all of them will determine the quality of your life, those around you and those after you.

And by the way, while you are out there on your adventure saving the world, please don't forget to have fun. Above all, choose to laugh at yourself. Believe me, life is much more enjoyable with daily laughs!

About the University

With a growing reputation for innovative research addressing complex urban issues, the University of Massachusetts Boston, metropolitan Boston's only public university, offers its diverse student population both an intimate learning environment and the rich experience of a great American city. UMass Boston's 11 colleges and graduate schools serve more than 16,000 students while engaging local, national, and international constituents through academic programs, research centers, and public service activities.

Part of the five-campus University of Massachusetts system, UMass Boston is located on a peninsula in Boston Harbor, near the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum and the Massachusetts State Archives and Museum. To learn more about UMass Boston, visit www.umb.edu.

About the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies

Named in honor of U.S. House of Representatives Speaker John W. McCormack, the McCormack Graduate School was founded in 2003 as an academic and research center in policy studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. We are the go-to school for a world-class interdisciplinary education and values-driven research that seeks to explain and offer remedies for some of the most important social, political, economic, and environmental issues of our time. A dynamic institution with a teaching soul, we train the next generation of local and global leaders in conflict resolution, gerontology, global governance and human security, international relations, public affairs, and public policy.



UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON
50 Years

About This Series

Based on in-person interchanges, the stories told in the Global Leadership Dialogues Series offer insights into the professional work and personal experiences of notable professionals in the global governance field. The series provides in-depth perspectives on what these leaders think about key issues in global governance, what inspires them, and how they imagine the future.

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