



CLARENCE HOUSE

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to have been asked to offer a few words by way of introduction to your conference, “Climate Change and the Courts”, and can only apologize for not being able to do so in person!

There could scarcely be a more topical theme for your discussion. We are only a few months away from climate change negotiations in Paris, which present an absolutely crucial opportunity to broker a new international agreement to prevent the irreversible and devastating effects of climate change. I seem to remember saying the same sort of thing at the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties back in 2009 and here we are six years later having missed the vital opportunity to prevent global temperature rise above two degrees Celsius.

Earlier this year, in another speech, I called for the new climate agreement in Paris to be a “Magna Carta for the Earth”. For leaders in the international community, the negotiations are a vital opportunity to agree upon a coherent and ambitious agenda to ensure environmental sustainability for generations to come. We absolutely cannot let this moment pass without committing to clear goals for curbing greenhouse gas emissions. Already, the European Union has set out its goals for a forty per cent cut in emissions by 2030 compared with 1990 levels – this is an important step, and other nations must agree on binding targets too if we are to have any hope of tackling climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change urged the global community to take immediate action in its 2014 Synthesis Report, warning “continued emission of greenhouse gases will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems.”

However, as you all know, the eight hundredth anniversary year of Magna Carta is not just an opportunity for politicians. The challenge posed by climate change is too great for governments alone – it seems to me that all of us must play our part. One example is my Rainforests Project back in 2007, where we tried to emphasize the importance of restoring our planet’s precious forests, which could deliver up to thirty per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions mitigation that we need to make. I have also previously called upon consumers and businesses to make a sustained commitment to improving humanity’s relationship with the natural environment, such as by moving away from our current throw-away society to a more “circular” economy where materials are recovered, recycled and reused instead of being dumped in landfills and oceans.

In keeping with the theme of your conference, it occurs to me – as I am sure it does to all of you – that our courts will also play a crucial role in helping us to mitigate and adapt to climate change. I was very interested to learn that the United Nations Environment Programme is actively involved in promoting judicial understanding of environmental law around the world, whereby judges from around the globe meet to discuss ways that courts can support the achievement of climate change goals. Ladies and gentlemen, I am heartened to see that so many illustrious legal practitioners, judges and academics are engaging with this issue and have convened this highly important conference today.

The environment cannot speak for itself – it depends on others to advocate on its behalf. The various and complex impacts of climate change such as loss of habitats, disease, extreme weather events and migration may well result in cases before our courts. As lawyers, you can help to inform the public and fellow members of your profession that we must act urgently to prevent the disastrous consequences of global warming. And achievement of legally-binding goals such as cutting greenhouse gas emissions are long-term aims that independent courts may be called upon to oversee.

I am sure that politicians and judges alike will be astute to ensure that as a society we do not allow ourselves to be distracted from our environmental commitments. I fervently believe that the appalling threat human-induced climate change poses to mankind's future cannot – and should not – be underestimated.

HRH The Prince of Wales