

**Rt Hon Helen Clark**

**Convocation Address, University of Toronto Fall Convocation  
2023**

**Tuesday 7 November 2023**

**Chancellor, and all other distinguished members of the university  
community present,**

**Graduands,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen.**

**Thank you to the University of Toronto for honouring me with the  
award of the Doctor of Laws degree.**

**As a high school student in the 1960s, I wondered if I might study  
law at university. But, careers advice in those days was negligible,  
and none of my family members had ever been to university, let  
alone studied law.**

**Instead, I majored in history and political studies, and completed  
my Master's degree in the latter in the early 1970s. Both proved  
to be an excellent foundation for the career I went on to have in**

**public life, although I could not have known that when I made those subject choices.**

**Often young people have asked me: what should I study? My answer always is: study a subject about which you are passionate and which can sustain your interest. Whatever it is, an academic qualification will open doors, both to personal development and to careers – some of which you may never have imagined pursuing.**

**I am also often asked: did you ever think you would become Prime Minister of New Zealand when you were young?**

**My answer is – never in my wildest dreams. Few women had ever been elected to the New Zealand Parliament, and not even a handful had been ministers when I was a student.**

**But I grew up as a member of a lucky generation – in a society which offered security and opportunity to us. We were the post-World War Two baby boomers in an era of full employment when anything seemed possible. Our forebears had experienced two World Wars and two depressions. They wanted us to have better lives, and public policy decisions by the leaders of the day made**

**that possible. As well, I pay tribute to my parents who always supported me to complete my education and follow my dreams.**

**Was a political career following a dream? In a way, yes – although such careers have both huge highs and devastating lows. For me, it was about contributing back to the society which had done so much for me, and working to ensure that future generations could enjoy the opportunities and the security that I had had.**

**I entered Parliament at the age of 31 as one of eight women in the 92-seat legislature. The prospects initially didn't look so great for one perceived as feminist and radical. But our generation helped change attitudes to the role of women in politics – to the extent that the last Parliament in New Zealand achieved gender parity, and New Zealand has had female Prime Ministers for seventeen of the last 26 years.**

**As a Member of Parliament for a central Auckland suburban area, my focus was on the basics of social security, housing, health care, and education. But international affairs had been a big interest of mine since student days, and I was lucky enough to sit on the relevant parliamentary committees and have a hand in**

**shaping New Zealand's nuclear-free legislation which persists to this day.**

**Both domestic and foreign policy issues loomed large on my agenda as Prime Minister. There was a lot of rebuilding of basic services to be done at home, and a lot of innovation too in social, economic, and cultural policy. Responding to the growing climate crisis became a major priority.**

**The defining foreign policy issue of that time was the invasion of Iraq, which my government in New Zealand, along with Canada's, refused to support. I am convinced that history will record that we made the right call.**

**On leaving New Zealand politics, I served for eight years as head of the United Nations Development Programme. This was an incredible opportunity to work at the global level for inclusion, sustainability, and resilience – attributes I look for in all that I do.**

**There is much cynicism about the UN in our societies, and the failure of the Security Council to function effectively in resolving conflicts carries a lot of responsibility for that. But the UN's development and humanitarian agencies do an incredible job, and**

**I count myself privileged to have been a leader among them. I would recommend careers with the UN agencies without hesitation.**

**These days, I dedicate myself to the public good through a range of international initiatives - from the review of the global pandemic response for the World Health Assembly, to promoting the health and well-being of women, children, and adolescents, and championing drug policy reform and good governance in the extractives sector. These are all long-term endeavours. In international work, it's not that Rome isn't built in a day; it may not be built in a decade or two.**

**I look back on a life of public service with great satisfaction, and with gratitude that I had access to the education and opportunity to succeed. All today's graduands have been given that opportunity too.**

**But I also look forward knowing that there is so much more to do, and that the generation of today's graduands will be picking up the torch in a very troubled world. The need is urgent for climate action, for conflict resolution and peace, and for the eradication of**

**poverty in all its dimensions. The challenges are great, but there is a niche for each one of us in finding solutions.**

**My call to each of today's graduands is to find that niche for yourself, and to be a force for a better world. Your education has given you the knowledge and skills both to build solid careers and to make a difference for the better for your community, your country, and our world. Please make that difference! I wish all those graduating today all the very best for the future.**