

## **A Challenge to the United States to lead the world on Global Warming**

*Closing remarks of Sir John Houghton's lecture  
'Global Warming; the science, the impacts and the politics'  
at University of California, Irvine, 20 February 2003.*

I have been explaining what we know about the science and the impacts of human induced climate change and also what mitigating action can be taken. It is almost certainly the most serious environmental problem facing the world at the present time. It is imperative that action to slow the change and to stabilise the climate is taken by all nations especially by the ones that are emitting the most and also by those that have the greatest capacity to act.

In July 1969, scientists from the United States reached the moon for the first time. Almost a decade earlier, in an inspirational speech President John F Kennedy had set this goal for the people of this nation. It was a very costly venture but the American economy was not damaged, rather it was enhanced through the great technical innovation that resulted from it. That pioneering work in the exploration of space and the great developments in computer technology that came in its wake brought about tremendous advance in the knowledge of our Earth and of how the climate system works. US scientists have been in the forefront of this vast increase in understanding that underlies the sort of story I have told you today. Their number includes many from the Irvine campus including your Chancellor, Michael Prather and those in the Earth System Science department.

In 1990 I was privileged to present the first IPCC report to Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet who had already recognised anthropogenic climate change as a serious political issue. She once said that we humans have a lease on the Earth that we inhabit but it's a full repairing lease. So, in closing, may I suggest that there is another challenge for the people of the United States – one not dissimilar from that of going to the moon - that of taking the lead in caring for our Earth, its peoples and its climate. That challenge comes to you particularly strongly because, of all the world's countries, not only are you making the largest contribution to the potential damage but also because you possess the greatest capacity to act. Through leadership in science, technology and innovation, your industry and your political leaders could act decisively – just as John Kennedy did in the 1960s – and ensure that our children and grandchildren do not inherit a world with the sort of problems that I have been outlining to you tonight. Sir Crispin Tickell who was a recent UK Ambassador to the United Nations has said of this issue that we humans know what to do but lack the will to do it. There is no doubt at all that you in the US have the means but may I be so bold as to ask, have you got the will?