

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP DIALOGUES

Insights and Inspirations from Change Leaders



Naturalist and Novelist

STANLEY JOHNSON

Stanley Johnson is a renowned writer, explorer, and environmental advocate. Recipient of the Newdigate Prize for Poetry in 1962, he has written more than 20 books, many on environmental issues. An avid advocate for species protection, he serves as ambassador for the United Nations Convention on Migratory Species and is the honorary president for the Gorilla Organization. In 2011, at the age of 71, as part of a fundraiser for the Gorilla Organization, he climbed to the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro (nearly 20,000 ft).

Johnson's career began with environmental policy and diplomacy. He served at the World Bank in the 1960s, was the head of the Prevention of Pollution division for the European Commission in the 1970s, and held the position of vice chairman of the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Consumer Protection at the European Parliament from 1979 to 1984. He returned to the European Commission in 1984 as senior environmental adviser engaged in drafting environmental legislation, including the European Union's Habitats Directive.

Stanley has six children, all of whom have successful careers in fields such as politics, writing, and teaching. Following in his father's political footsteps, Stanley's eldest son, Boris Johnson, has been the mayor of London since 2008. Stanley and his wife, Jennifer, divide their time between a house in London and their farm in Exmoor, England, but Stanley continues to write and travel.

A senior fellow at the Center for Governance and Sustainability at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Stanley Johnson visited the university in October 2014 as a guest speaker in the transdisciplinary Coasts and Communities graduate program. He shared his insights on the milestones in 40 years of environmental policy with Associate Professor of global governance and Co-Director of the Center for Governance and Sustainability Maria Ivanova, for this interview for the Global Leadership Dialogues.

You have gone from poet to politician to environmental advocate and everything in between in your career. It is clear that you have a number of passions, and it seems as though you have had a terrific blend of commitment and opportunism in your professional life. What do you consider the milestones of your career?

Well, I think I can answer that both in terms of my writing and my career as an environmentalist. On the writing side, one major milestone of my career would have to be winning the Newdigate Prize for Poetry at Oxford. That is a prize which has been given to some famous poets like Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde—top-notch poets. So I was happy to receive that award.

A second milestone, also in the writing area, was a novel I wrote called *The Commissioner*. That was my sixth or seventh novel, and it was about a chap who was appointed to be the European commissioner. So I was using my knowledge of Europe there. That was a milestone because it was made into a film. If you're a novelist, as I am, having a novel made into a film doesn't always happen. If you're Dan Brown, it happens all the time. But if you're just Stanley Johnson, well, I've written nine novels and getting that one made into a film was a pretty big deal for me. It also wasn't just any old film. It was in the competition section of the Berlin Film Festival, which is a really big film festival. And it had an absolutely top cast: It had John Hurt in the

title role of the Commissioner and Armin Mueller-Stahl as the guy who sends into the Commission the details about how the environmental disasters are being funded, and it had the lovely Rosana Pastor as the woman who falls in love with the Commissioner. So that would be milestone number two.

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Milestone number three—moving away from the writing side—would probably be some work I did in 1969 after I left the World Bank. I joined the World Bank in the early 1960s. I had been working in Washington, and I was invited to come to New York in April 1968 to work with John D. Rockefeller III. He was the eldest of six siblings—I think there were five brothers and one sister—and they were, of course, amazingly influential people. John D. III was particularly renowned for his work in philanthropy: he founded the Asia Society and also the Population Council. In 1968, he was appointed by the United Nations Association of the United States to chair a National Policy Panel on World Population. The panel was asked to consider the role of



Books by Stanley Johnson: The Commissioner (Arrow Books Ltd, 1987); World Population and the United Nations (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Icecap (Cameron May, 1999); Stanley, I Presume (Fourth Estate, 2009); Survival (Interlink Pub Group, 2010); Where the Wild Things Were (Stacey International, 2012); and UNEP The First 40 Years: A Narrative by Stanley Johnson (United Nations Environment Programme, 2012); Stanley, I Resume (The Robson Press, 2014)

the UN in helping the world to come to grips with the population problem. You see, at the end of the '60s, as now, we were faced with burgeoning populations around the world. It was such an incredibly impressive panel. Blue ribbon throughout, really. For example, the vice chairman was George D. Woods, who had just resigned from being president of the World Bank. It also had David Bell, who was the president of the Ford Foundation.

Anyway, I was invited by UNA to serve as Rockefeller's chief of staff for that panel. I traveled around the world—I think I visited 18 countries to see what was going on in population and family planning. The main outcome of the panel was a report which said the UN should establish a Population Agency and that it should be run by a high-level appointee. We actually used the words “commissioner of population,” which is not the term they finally chose. They chose “executive director” of the UN Fund for Population Activities, or UNFPA. The report also recommended that funding for the agency should start off at a minimum of \$100 million per year. I was the main author of the report. I included the whole report at the end of my first nonfiction book, which was called *Life without Birth: A Journey through the Third World in Search of the Population Explosion*.

And, now, to give Richard Nixon credit—he was President at the time, of course—within days of our publishing the report, he sent a message to Congress called the Presidential Message on Population, where he said he was encouraged by the “scope and thrust” of the Rockefeller Report and that the United States would put every effort into funding the UNFPA and supporting its work. And really within days, the UNFPA was established. It was the United Nations Fund for Population Activities in those days; now it is just called the United Nations Population Fund. It was budgeted at the level of \$100 million, and it received \$100 million. So that was extraordinary. That was milestone number three for me. And all credit should go to the United States for the leadership role it played in setting up the UN Population Fund. Of course, what's happening now is another story. There has been something of a sea change in the United States on population issues. I don't need to go into that now, because you asked about my own milestones.

Milestone number four for me would have been the work I did in Europe. Particularly in setting up the network of protected areas in Europe for all the habitats. When I came back to Brussels in 1984, having had five years in the European Parliament, I was a key environmental advisor



Janez Potočnik, former Commissioner for Environment at the EU, delivering the opening speech at the 20th Anniversary Conference of Natura 2000

and responsible for writing a lot of the environmental legislation. Much of it was related to specific animals. But I wrote a general draft called the EU's Habitat and Species Directive, which has led to the creation of protected areas throughout Europe. Natura 2000 was established under the Habitats Directive and is probably the single biggest network of protected areas in the world. At this moment, it covers 18 percent of the 27 member states of the EU, and we hope we will have more marine protected areas soon. So milestone number four would certainly be the work I did in the EU and in particular the Habitats Directive, which has just had its 20th anniversary. I was absolutely delighted to be given a prize for my work on producing the directive.

So then I have two milestones that are more on the personal side. The first of these is about getting married to my second wife, Jenny. As you know, I have written two memoirs. The first of these is *Stanley, I Presume*. In the new one, *Stanley, I Resume*, I describe an interview I had with the Pope where he really suggested I might get married to Jenny. I was being introduced to the Pope in the papal apartments in Rome. Jim Scott-Hopkins was introducing me—he was an MP in England and a member of the European Parliament. He said, “And this is Mr. Johnson.” And then he looked at Jenny, my girlfriend at the time, and he had no idea who she was. So he said, “And this is Mr. Johnson, this is uh, uh...” And he had no idea what to say. So the Pope said in an irritated voice, “Well, Mrs. Johnson, I presume.” So after the papal audience went into the piazza at St. Peter's, I think I said to Jenny, “Well, we'd



Stanley Johnson with his wife, Jenny

better sit here and have a pizza.” And as we were sitting in the restaurant, I said, “Well, what do you think?” So she looked at the menu and said, “Well, I think I’ll have a pizza with extra anchovies.” So I said, “No, no. What do you think about the Pope calling you Mrs. Johnson?” Anyway milestone number five would be the fact that after that visit to the Pope, 33 years later, I am still married to Jenny.

And the last milestone would again be a personal one. I am lucky enough to be blessed with six children—four with my first wife, two with my second wife. And each of those kids has completely overtaken me in terms of achievement, visibility, and general likability. One of them is the mayor of London. That would be Boris. And Rachel is a major columnist for the Mail on Sunday, which is probably the most widely read newspaper in England. My son Jo is a minister for policy planning in the government. Leo is a senior partner on sustainability for PriceWaterhouseCoopers. My daughter Julia is a singer and a teacher of Latin. And my youngest son, Maximilian, is working for Goldman Sachs in Hong Kong. So my sixth and last milestone would be the fact I have a lot of happy kids. I am actually quite

happy to retire into the background now, which is the reason I’m here in the U.S. in Massachusetts on a sunny day.

Clearly, your family has a tradition of leadership. You have been a leader in the environmental field and in politics internationally and nationally, and it seems your whole family has two passions: of politics and poetry or perhaps literature and journalism. As you mentioned, your children all have illustrious careers. So what are dinner conversations like when the Johnson family gathers for the holidays?

Well, it is a nice thought. I do have this farm down in the west of England, which I describe in my memoirs. And it is true that we do get together on the farm. We have had that farm since 1951, so that’s over 60 years, but we don’t get together that often now. They’re all so busy that I doubt if we all get together more than three or four times in the course of a year. It really is only for the major occasions. We were together for my 70th birthday, for example. And we had a splendid cricket match where the Johnsons took on the local village. As for conversations, I’m sure, amongst lots of other things, we talk about books. I tend

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Stanley Johnson (far right) with family. From left to right: son Leo, daughter Rachel, son Boris, son Jo, and daughter-in-law Marina

to write a book a year. They all write books. And so we most recently got together because Boris, my oldest son, has just written a brilliant book called *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Changed the World*. In any event, we do get together sometimes, but I would say that is more in the past than the current. Maybe we will get together again for my 80th birthday.

Does Boris Johnson, the mayor of London, come to you for advice on any environmental or political matters?

No. In his current role, it would be very difficult for him to do so. If, for example, I send him an email, we would have to consider the Freedom of Information Act. You know, it could be “trawled” by somebody saying, “Please can I see all the emails you receive from your father?” So I tend to keep my emails pretty banal—along the lines of “What do you think of chicken masala?” or something like that.

And I certainly would not write to tell him what I think he ought to do. I think he does know my view. For example, John Vidal the environmental editor for the *Guardian*—a very well-known guy—published a story not so long ago saying that “Boris’s plan to have an airport in the estuary of the Thames may frustrate his father’s great nature protection scheme.” So yes, if you were to dig deep, there are certainly issues which I think are pretty jolly important which he might not think are so important on the political front. From my point of view, for example, I think this world dash to growth, which all politicians are enamored of, leads us to enormous conflicts between the environment and biodiversity. And I think that one of the ways of dealing with that is to say, “let’s have a low-growth model.” So what this gets back to is population. If I go back again into my Rockefeller days, in addition to joining this UN panel I mentioned, John III chaired a panel, which Nixon set up, called the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future. That panel reported in 1969. That report said, in a visionary way, that they saw no purpose in the American population rising to 300 million or 400 million. They concluded that there was no issue which would not be exacerbated by a continued growth in population. So, in a nutshell, I do not think the political parties are anywhere near there, whereas I probably am. I am much more on what you might call the Club of Rome side of the argu-

ment. I do not think we ought to have this dash to growth all the time. Here in Boston, for example, I might say, “Did we really need the Big Dig?”¹

In 2013, Boston elected a new mayor, Marty Walsh. He is a public figure, a public servant, and very engaged with this university. What would you tell the mayor of Boston if you met him?

I would tell him that he is the mayor of a wonderful place, and how vital it is to continue the wonderful work which

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has been done. For example, what has been done by the scientists at the University of Massachusetts in clearing up the waters of Boston Harbor and protecting this superb coastline. I would tell him that the environmental assets of this city are quite astonishing. I know the harbor is a protected area—just this morning, by UMass Boston, I saw some cormorants eating fish, which is a wonderful sign. And I would link that, of course, to the astonishing cultural assets of this city. I have been here over the years quite often, and I just think it is absolutely wonderful how there is such a blend in the center of Boston of the old and the new in such a brilliant way.

So I think my message to all mayors would be: Don’t think you have to expand, expand, expand forever. And that, of course, is where the element of population planning does come in. It is a difficult one. Most mayors will find it difficult to deal with. For example, I presume here in Boston you have a pretty unrestricted immigration policy. And you’ll find that most mayors are very proud when they’re saying, “Their city is now 9 million, 10 million, 20 million.”

You mentioned the scientists at the University of Massachusetts. Let’s talk about that aspect for a little bit. This could be described as the science-policy interface. How do science and policy interact, and what do

¹Editor’s note: The Big Dig (The Central Artery/Tunnel Project) was a roadway reconfiguration project for the city of Boston from 1991 to 2007. It was successful in decongesting and reorganizing the major highways and tunnels and in creating green spaces above ground, but it cost \$24.3 billion, making it the most expensive project of its kind in United States.



Photo: www.wikimedia.org

The Cormorant, a coastal bird species

The environmental assets of this city are quite astonishing.



Photo: Maria Ivanova/UMass Boston.

Cormorants at UMass Boston

we produce as a result? What do you think policymakers might currently not understand about working with scientists?

Well, I do think they are getting the facts from scientists. When I was in the European Commission and the European Parliament—as I was for many years—we didn’t lack for facts. I mean if you had to set EU standards for say, water pollution, on the whole there were people in there who either were scientists themselves or had access to scientists. So they did know about dose-effect relationships and so on and so forth. I would say what it comes down to, then, is where you draw the line. So the scientists can say, “If you dump this much in the water, these are the effects which are likely to happen.” And there’s a curve there. But where the line is drawn on the curve or through the curve, you see, that is a political decision. And those political decisions are always influenced by many other things as well as scientists. They tend to be influenced by short-term considerations to do with things like growth and employment. In the United States, in particular, you have this voting system whereby people who seek elective office often have their campaigns funded, at least in part, by a vested interest. So that element comes in. That is not to say that vested interests don’t operate in Europe too. Of course they do. But in the United States you have something else to fight against. You have the media. Sometimes the media will side with the scientists,

but there are also the countervailing pressures of business, and those countervailing pressures can be brought directly to bear on the voters, on the congressmen, on the politicians and the campaign, and the campaign funding. So it is quite intriguing. I would say I am fairly pessimistic at the moment about the ability or the willingness of politicians to actually deal with environmental problems.

So would you say there is one environmental issue that stands out as an important one for the science-policy interface?

Yes, I would say that the climate change issue is perhaps the case. And this, of course, is where your Center for Governance and Sustainability here at UMass Boston has played a vital role, because you do analyze what the UN is doing and you analyze some of the pressures being brought to bear on the UN. For example, if you look back at the climate change issue, and you go back to 1997, that July, I think it was, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution before the Kyoto Summit saying that the United States should not sign the Kyoto agreement unless it also covered developing countries, knowing full well that it would not cover developing countries. That resolution passed 95 to zero! So you have to look at this in a cynical way and you say to yourself, “What was the impact of, say, the American Enterprise Institute?” which was a big player in the game at that time in terms of funding senatorial cam-

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paigns, for example. This may seem altogether too cynical, but if I look at it now I see clearly the inability of the political system we have to deal with these major issues related to climate change.

I have to say I rather side with Naomi Klein on this one. I just read her latest book, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, and I side with her basically because there is such a momentum in the existing system, and we know that the existing system—if it is allowed to go on—simply cannot deliver. So how can we change that model? That is where the kind of work which is done here at the University of Massachusetts Boston on these issues, and the way this gets fed into the media and into the general science pot, is terrifically important.

So let's focus on climate change leadership for a moment. Climate change is the existential challenge of our time, and as the saying goes: Hope for the best; prepare

for the worst. For this issue, the worst-case scenario is rather devastating, and you are pretty pessimistic about leadership these days. What kind of leadership and leaders do you imagine are necessary for that transformation to take place?

The first thing that comes to mind is people like Mao Zedong—some total dictator figure who, having seen the light, knows that the only thing he can do is to bring in the policies necessary to deal with it. In a way, that is what China is trying to do on the population front. They realized they were going to get into real trouble with their population growth, so they committed to the one-child family. That policy is now desperately criticized on all sides, of course, and the government relaxed it not long ago. Now, you may think that is a frivolous answer, and I don't mean to sound frivolous. However, if you take Platonic Theory of Democracy, which said that the wisest men would become the leaders, it doesn't actually happen. So how can we



Stanley Johnson with Siswi the orangutan at Camp Leakey in Borneo

manage to get what you might call the Mao Zedong chap through democratic processes? The change from what we have now to the strong, visionary leadership we need would be vast.

Let's look at this another way. Let's go back to the 1970s. I was in New York on April the 22, 1970, the very first Earth Day, and I walked in the streets. In September of this year, 2014, we had more than 300,000 people walking in the streets of New York for the People's Climate March. And that's another big hopeful sign: to get 300,000 people in the streets. This probably hasn't happened in a big way since 1970. So, maybe we are seeing a sea change. But even so... Let's assume that popular interest in environment is coming back. Let's assume it is coming back at the street level, which I think is a big assumption. You refer to climate change as this existential issue. How does that get translated into the people who are going to be elected and then be our political leaders? Well, the experience in Britain has not been great over the past few years. Maybe you could say these were exceptional circumstances, because of the recession. Maybe this was not the most propitious moment for the relaunch of the environmental movement. The dilemma is that every time you have economic growth, it might be a propitious moment for the environmental movement to be relaunched, but precisely because of economic growth the challenges are that much greater. So, I really cannot give you an answer on this. I wish I could. I would like to see us elect people who really are able to carry through—with the consent of the people—major programs for these problems.

Now, climate change is a particular problem because of the scale and the international politics involved. For example, if the EU, the UK, and even the United States were to decide to really take it seriously and, say, commit to cutting emissions aggressively enough in order to have some chance of staying below the 2 degree Celsius increase, we know it is going to be jolly difficult to bring along some of the other major emitting countries—particularly those that are in phases of rapid economic growth. So then you have to try and tell the populations in the wealthier countries that their obligations may have to be even greater to

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People's Climate March, New York City, 2014

compensate for the fact that the developing world is less likely to participate.

What is the role of academia in this context?

I honestly think it is vital. If you take a look at the key environmental issues over the past 40 years, the role academia has played has been absolutely vital. Take the ozone issue. It was a British Antarctic scientist who was looking through his Dobson's photo spectrophotometer and spotted the hole in the ozone layer. Later on is when industry and politics became involved. If you take climate change, you can go all the way back to the end of the 19th century and see academic articles. So, in terms of sussing out the problem, I would say academia has been 100 percent vital. And of course there are other issues. For example, there are people here in this university who are studying crucial things like endocrine disruptors. Some scientists were trying to figure out why certain fish populations were losing the ability to propagate, and it turned out to be related to women taking birth control pills. So the UN produced a convention called the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants to deal with this and similar issues. That would not have happened if there hadn't been scientists out there studying these things. Now what you are talking about, of course, is the interface between science and policy. It is also about the social sciences, of course, because it is about the sustainable development matrix: it is economic, it is environmental, it is social, and it is political. You could say it is a multidimensional matrix, a bit like a Rubik's Cube. And if you know what to do with it, some people can solve a Rubik's Cube in 15 seconds.

Is there an educational model that universities should strive for to be able to produce the leaders of tomorrow, who would be able to understand the problems locally and globally? Who would be able to act on solving them both locally and globally?

The United States of America has been absolutely remarkable in producing scientists who have become political—but political with a small “p”—leaders. They haven't nec-

essarily sought elective office themselves, but they have become major political figures. I am thinking of people like E. O. Wilson at Harvard or Paul Ehrlich at Stanford. And you can go all the way back to the 1950s and 1960s: just think of Rachel Carson and her amazing work as a scientist for the U.S. government. She wasn't an academic, so to speak, but she forged paths for connecting science and policy. Bert Bolin also comes to mind. He was a meteorology professor before he became the first chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. And, of course, Mostafa Tolba was a most remarkable man, because he

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was the interface between science and policymaking and was a professor of microbiology before he joined and then took over as executive director of UNEP. I would say that it is not often that you get a man who is knowledgeable in terms of science in the right place in terms of the institution, but also with a personality which really enables him to drive things through. In fact, you could say if you wanted to be cynical, you could ask why the governments, having set up the IPCC in 1988, strenuously fail to deliver on its mission? Why didn't they, for example, let Tolba take charge of the climate change issue? They probably feared he was going to be too effective. They didn't want to be bullied in the way he had bullied them on the ozone treaty really.

So let's finish by talking about your recent work for UNEP. The same people who were involved in forming the UN Population Fund—prominent figures such as Ambassador John W. McDonald—went on to create a similar organization for the environment, the UN Environment Programme. You have just published a sort of a biography of UNEP at 40, and you have witnessed the evolution of governance for the environment over that time. What

has changed qualitatively in those 40 years, and what would you expect would happen in the next 40 years for UNEP and for environmental governance more broadly?

I would say not enough has changed. When the UN Population Fund was formed, within days \$100 million had been committed. UNEP has had a long, hard struggle to secure the funds. To be clear, there was comparable seed funding for UNEP at the outset—given by the United States and other countries—but UNEP has just stayed at that level whereas UNFPA has gone up.

In any event, I think UNEP does have an important role, and I think the recent change in terms of its Assembly, making its membership universal, was significant. But I think the governments are never going to put huge amounts of money into UNEP—partly because of the whole problem of developed countries funding organizations they don't control. That is a historic issue, and there is no way around it. The institutions in the UN system which the governments are ready to fund are the Bretton Woods Institutions—the World Bank and the IMF, and possibly the regional development banks. So that is the issue. And if you want real leadership in the UN system, you have to be able to ensure that the World Bank and the IMF and the other development banks have really gone green. And that's not a foregone conclusion because there are so many other pressures on the donors to those institutions.

Reflecting on the 40 years of international environmental policy, is there anything you would like to share with us in conclusion?

I have to say I feel pretty lucky with my lot. I am still able to travel around the world and experience new and familiar places.

I am, as you mentioned, an ambassador for the United Nations Convention on Migratory Species, which is one of the UNEP conventions. I also am the honorary president for the Gorilla Organization, which focuses on maintaining the remaining gorilla population in Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. I feel fortunate that I can still remain active with organizations I cherish. And I have spent the past 12 years both in that capacity and as a writer traveling around the world looking at wild animals. I also enjoy being able to work on projects such as my recent work depicting UNEP's history. It has been

The United States of America has been absolutely remarkable in producing scientists who have become political—but political with a small “p”—leaders.



All five consecutive executive directors of UNEP at the 2009 Global Environmental Governance Forum in Glion, Switzerland. From left to right: Achim Steiner, Maurice Strong, Mostafa Tolba, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, and Klaus Töpfer

a progressive 40 years for international policy, especially in the environmental field. Although there are many areas that still need a lot of work, especially in implementation, I can see the effort to do so, such as the projects that come out of the Center for Governance and Sustainability here at UMass Boston. The real push from here needs to be in interdisciplinary work with an emphasis on strong leaders in the natural and social sciences. So I would say

that the past 40 years have shown us some extraordinary milestones—both good and bad—and that for things to turn around as we need them to, the scientists, the politicians, and the people need to recognize that we have to work together to find new ways of doing things.

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts. It was a pleasure to have you with us!



Stanley Johnson as the CMS Goodwill Ambassador at the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals in Quito, Ecuador, 2014



Stanley Johnson with Maria Ivanova (third from the left) and the team of the Center for Governance and Sustainability

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.

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UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

50 Years

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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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