Discurs d'acceptació de Philippe Sands, durant l'acte de la seva investidura com a doctor Honoris Causa per la UPF

(11 de febrer 2026)

Well, thank you. What an incredible morning!

I am deeply honored and deeply touched, and I don't really know where to begin. I think I've got to begin by apologizing that I am speaking in English, not in Catalan or in Spanish.

But I want to thank all of you for coming, and those associated with the University: the President, the Faculty, the staff, and of course you, Ángel. You have put so much work into this. I am hugely touched and hugely moved, and incredibly happy to be here. It is truly an honor and a privilege for me to be with you here in Barcelona, in Catalunya, in Spain, at this great University, Pompeu Fabra, which I have come to know well over the years through friends and students I've had in London, and in the United States, and elsewhere, who have come from this University.

And I also want to thank, of course, Judit and Pau for the incredible musical rendition, as those of you who know my work will understand. In all of my books there is always reference to music. There is something magical about the way music takes words and, with them together, opens up the imagination and takes us to another place.

The truth is that Barcelona has a very big place in my heart and in my scheme of things. Of all the cities and places I've come to know in Spain, none is closer to me than Barcelona, right? I've visited Barcelona more than any other place in Spain, dozens and dozens of times, and so I feel very at home here, in this University. And you can understand that I accept this honor with an open heart and with great appreciation, and you can forever treat me as an ambassador of this great University, thus I am happy to publicly declare it. One of the reasons that Barcelona has such a place in my heart is because I have so many good friends in Barcelona. I've had so many university colleagues who have come from or are based in Barcelona. My godson, Max Fabra, who is a student now at this University is here possibly in the room today. I saw him yesterday. Another student here, today, is my dear friend Marianna Camelio, who is doing her master's degree in Creative Writing at this great University. She features, as you probably know, some of you, as a very significant character in my last book, *Calle Londres 38*, and hails from Punta Arenas very far away, but also close to my heart.

But you also mentioned, Ángel, the county of Spain is really not so very far from me. You mentioned my wife's grandparents and my wife's mother who is Spanish, and who plays a very big role in our lives. There is of course, as you described, a very strong Republican connection in the family, which I think has played a very big role in my life over the last thirty-five years, as that has infused my thinking about so many things. A Republican family that arrived in Britain in 1940: a mother and a father, and a little girl who was five years old who would, twenty years later or so, bear two daughters, one of whom would become my wife. And I think the reality is that I am

standing before you as the, sort of, confluence of a lot of reasons. We are where we are, and we do what we do not on our own. I have always worked at university, in the cases that I have done, in writing my books, and of course in my home life, as part of a team. And so it's really incumbent on me to begin, I think, anything I say by thanking all of those who have just contributed to my lucky life in so many ways. And that Spanish influence is crucial.

I suspect my life would have been very different if on the 30th of October 1998 I had not listened to my wife of Spanish origins. Those of you who have read *Calle Londres 38* will know that on that day, while I was in Paris, at the funeral of my grandfather I received a phone call from the lawyers of Augusto Pinochet, asking me to be his layer, asking me to argue on his behalf, that he had absolute immunity from the jurisdiction of the English courts, he could not be subject to legal process in Britain and he should be returned back to Santiago, Chile.

What you probably don't know is that amongst my various characters I am a barrister. We are the part of the English legal profession where we wear wigs, and we wear gowns and as you probably know English people love to dress up and they love to crossdress actually. And one of the rules that we have at the English Bar is that we have a principle which is called the "cab rank principle", the principle of the taxi driver. As a barrister, you are sort of driving along and someone says "taxi", and you cannot say "I don't like that person", "I don't like that politic", "I don't like the color of their skin", there is something I don't like and I am not going to take them on a taxi journey. We are not allowed to do that as barristers, we are obliged to take all of the cases that come to us. And so when I received the phone call from

Augusto Pinochet's lawyers, my instinct as a good English barrister was, well ok, you know, I have to do the case. That's the case I have to do. They were the first to contact me, and that's the case I probably will have to do, and to be honest, very honest, it was sort of exciting because the Pinochet case was the most important international criminal case since Nuremberg. It was the first time, that ever in human history, the former head of state of one country, Chile, is arrested in another country, the United Kingdom, to be extradited to a third country, Spain to face charges of international crimes: genocide, torture, crimes against humanity. So, there is that aspect, as a barrister you sort of want to be involved in those kinds of cases. So I got to the cemetery and at the cemetery gates in Paris, at the Cimetière de Pantin, waited my half-Spanish wife, Natalia Chiffrin, and I told her with quite a lot of excitement, uh guess what I think I am going to be involved in the Pinochet case. And she said "On whose side?". I said "Well, Augusto Pinochet." She said "Really, and will you do it?". And I said "well, you know, the taxi driver principle... I don't have any choice". And the other thing you need to know about Natalia, is that she has a Spanish mother, a French father, but actually grew up in New York, and is an American lawyer, and she thinks the taxi driver principle is total *bullshit*. "Will you do it?" she said. "Well, you know, I don't like what he's done but taxi driver principle" She said, "Fine. Fine. You do the case, and tomorrow I divorce you." And this was, of course, a principled position on her part, but also I think influenced by her own family story and her own family background. And of course I didn't do it. We are very happily married twenty-five years later. As always, Natalia saved me from myself, and I suspect that if I had acted for Augusto Pinochet, I would not be standing here with you today.

All of this is a way of saying that there is a deep personal connection for me to be with you today. And I think many of you understand that. I had an amazing couple of days. I'd say perfect, but for one moment, last night, when, and I sent a photograph of the moment to my friends in London overnight, and woke up this morning to a barrage of abuse from my friends because the photograph showed me holding a Barcelona football shirt. Those of you who know me well know that I have been a season ticket holder at Arsenal for fifty years, and we are expecting to play Barcelona at some point in the Champions League in the next few weeks or months, perhaps even in the final, who knows. The sight of me wearing a Barcelona shirt was sufficient to cause a great deal of abuse overnight which I have woken up to this morning. But, I love the shirt, I love the number fourteen on the back, and I love the name Sands. And I will find a moment to wear a Barcelona shirt. I don't know where that is going to be. Barcelona, actually, beat Arsenal in the 2006 Champions League Final, as you know. We were one-nil up, with fifteen minutes to go, but the thing about an Arsenal supporter is you never have hope. You live with this constant fear of disaster and even this year as we are on top of the first division, on top of the Champions League with an absolutely brilliant team, contrary to my innate character of hope and optimism I always sense the disaster is round the corner.

So, Barcelona, as I said, occupies a very special place in my life. It always had a wonderful tradition of legal activism, academic lawyers, practitioner lawyers, legal thinkers, legal philosophers and it is also an extraordinary literary capital which, for me, is very important indeed. I first really encountered Barcelona when I was 15 years old. We had a wonderful teacher of English at school and she made us

read a book by George Orwell who many of us (myself included) are very partial to, called *Homage to Catalonia,* and of course that inspired a desire to visit which I, then, did many more times. In fact, we had a very wonderful conversation last night with one of the guests, at the dinner, professor Miquel Berga on the merits and demerits of George Orwell and his relationship with his wife, Eileen. And as Miquel knows I am a very big believer - I was the President of English PEN, the writers' association-, in a broad church in freedom of expression, in people expressing any number of different views. That's what a university is about. That's what these kinds of places are about and people should feel free to express a range of different views without being attacked, without people being mean to them or nasty. We are sort of losing that in our culture these days and I loved the conversation last night about George Orwell and his wife Eileen and their relationship in different perspectives, on that relationship.

But of course Barcelona is home, or has been home, to many other writers who have influenced me very greatly. I'm thinking of writers like Roberto Bolaño, who wrote one of the books that has most influenced me in recent years, *Night of Chile,* not so far from Barcelona in the small village of Blanes. I'm thinking of my good friend Javier Cercas, who has opened my mind in so many ways to thinking about literature that I had never really read or come to know until much later in my life. And the Colombian writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez who lived here for nearly 15 years and for whom Barcelona is a home and he is, of course, a big supporter of Barcelona Football Club. And I think it's no coincidence that my wonderful Spanish publisher, to whom I am intensely grateful for the support and the collegiality of so many years, is based in Barcelona. I think it's not a

coincidence. And my wonderful publishers Silvia Sesé and Isabel Obiols, who I will be seeing later on. They've just been so fantastic in helping me weave together the different inspirations. One of the things that you'll be picking up from all of this is, I think, I am in a sense of true European although I have a British father and a French mother, the Spanish influence, the Catalan influence, the Barcelona influence has been so important in my style of lawyering, and in my style of writing, and I've always loved working with Spanish international lawyers in the cases that you referred to, Ángel, at the international court of Justice.

So, this is a way of saying, I suppose, not only just thank you but that Barcelona is a really special part of my life, in the legal sense and in the literary sense. Now, I can't speak this morning without, of course, saying something about the state of the world today. You've evoked it and it is plainly the case that we are living in very difficult times. There is an assault underway, I think you can put it as high as that, on the value system and the principles that were put in place in that remarkable moment in 1945 when the United Nations charter was signed. When the statute of the International military tribunal for Nuremberg was signed. And for the first time in human history, the principle and the rule was established that each of you in this room, as individuals and as members of various groups, have rights, not only under your national law but also under international law. And that idea, revolutionary in 1945, has slowly taken route and it has grown, and now 80 years later, in some quarters, it is challenged and it is challenged by the very leaders of countries that did so much to put those rules in place. And that is going to impose on each of us a burden as to how we react to these matters. Now these are things

that I've written about, in particular in the trilogy of books that began with *Calle Este Oeste* (*East West Street)* and then moved forward through to *El Escape* (The *Ratline)* and carried on with *Calle Londres 38 (38 London Street)*. The beating heart of those books are issues of the rights of individuals, the rights of groups, the role of individuals in changing the world, and at these most difficult of moments, but it's not the first time the world has faced difficult moments, I think back to the two characters I write about in *Calle Este Oeste*. Hersch Lauterpacht a Professor at Cambridge University in 1945, Rafael Lemkin, a refugee from Poland, a public prosecutor who invented the concepts of crimes against humanity and genocide. From the late 1930s, both of them lost all contact with their families. They had no idea what it happened to their parents, their siblings, their cousins, their aunts, their uncles, their nephews, their nieces, and it was only in the midst of the Nuremberg trial in March-April 1946 that they learned that they had lost all of their family members, and even more remarkably, they learned that fact while they were prosecuting a man, Hans Frank, Hitler's personal lawyer from 1928 to 1933 who had been responsible for those murders. You almost couldn't invent a more extraordinary moment. And at that time you could imagine, in that circumstance, that a human being would go into a corner, would curl up, and wood weep and say there's nothing I can do. They didn't do that. They developed ideas, words, legal concepts, they lobbied to to push those words, ideas, legal concepts and they took them forward and in 1945 and 1946 those words and legal concepts, crimes against humanity and genocide, became part of international law and part of everyday life. Basically not a day passes, now, if you read your newspapers or your social media where allegations of genocide or crimes against humanity are not raised. Those were not

raised in the 1930s, the words didn't exist, the concepts didn't exist, the idea that there could be accountability didn't exist, and so those two men, in a sense, stand for me as testimony for what we should do at this point, which is we don't give up.

Even in the most difficult of times, even when things are on a challenge, you stick to your principles, you stick to your ideas even if you're alone, even if you're solitary and you do the right thing. And I'm saying this mostly, I think, for the students who are in the room. It's plain but this is a difficult time. We have wars, we have crimes, we have genocide,e we have crimes against humanity, we have climate change, we have pandemics, it really does feel like an incredibly tough time. But the other side of the coin, is that it's in the toughest of times that people dig in, and they stick to their principles, and they stick to their ideas and so it falls to your generation, the students in this room today, to basically pick up the pieces and repair things, and make sure they're going forward. We have principles, and ideas, and rules, and decisions that are decent, and that we can live with, and go forward with. The world is a complex place, international law has been around for centuries. It is not the case that we live in a world without rules. It's not the case that we live in a world without law. Actually, most of the rules of the world in the form of treaties operate perfectly fine. There is a small number of those rules which are under assault but international law continues to have a role and the ideas of justice and accountability and against impunity will continue to be significant. In all of the work that I've done there are two moments that really stand out for me to indicate how much is possible even in the most difficult of times. In November 1998, having been involved in the Pinochet proceedings for Human Rights

Watch, I went to the House of Lords and watched five law Lords give a judgement. It was like a football match. Does Pinochet have immunity or not? The first judge speaks "full immunity", we are one-nil down. The second judge speaks "full immunity", two-nil down. Third judge speaks "no immunity", one-two. Forth judge speaks "no immunity", two-two. It is really like a football match. And there's one judge left, Lord Hoffman, and we knew he was on our side, and at that moment we understood the legal system would shift and it did shift. And the Pinochet precedent has not gone away. And although Pinochet did go back to Chile, it was not a case of total impunity. He was stripped of his immunity when he returned. There were multitude of proceedings against him. He was indicted and he died under house arrest, unable to leave his own home. That's not total impunity. And about 25 years later, you mentioned the case of Chagos, which most of you won't know, part of the British Colony of Mauritius which in 1965 is separated from the Colony and taken over by the British. Fifty years later, Mauritius, small African country, population, a million, takes on the British government and the US government, two permanent members of the security council, and gets in effect a unanimous decision from the international court of justice, in 2019 in February, that this is a violation of international law, that Chagos was illegally dismembered, that Chagos is and has always been part of the independence state of Mauritius, and that all the Chagossians who were forcedly removed, all of them, are entitled to go back. And you live for these kinds of moments. They're legal moments but they are also literary moments, and it is the interplay between these two things that really motivates me. And so, particularly for the students in the room, even in the most difficult of times, maintain your hope,

maintain your principles, maintain your ideas, and take them forward, even if they meet resistance which they will.

I listened, Ángel, to your wonderful words and I'm truly touched and I end, therefore, once again by thanking you. In a sense, sitting here today was a way to reflect on the totality of these issues that I've been so fortunate to be involved in, and so privileged to be involved in. And so, I thank Pompeu Fabra University, and the President, and the staff, and the Faculty, and all of you who have come today from the bottom of my heart. It's a deep honor. It's a deep privilege. I'm humbled and I really appreciate being with you today. Thank you so much.