

6th Annual Wolfson Sir David Williams Law Society Event Cambridge University, 7 March 2026

On 7 March 2026, Wolfson College - Cambridge University (UK), celebrated Sir David Williams, President of the College from 1980 to 1992, by hosting the 6th Annual Wolfson Sir David Williams Law Society Event

I participated at the Panel on *“Is the International Justice Under Threat?”*, chaired by Dr. Thomas Grant.

In light of recent geopolitical events involving US President Trump's stance on Greenland, I considered that the integrity of international justice may be at risk.

I supported my assessment by the following arguments:

- The architecture of international law is based on a simple blueprint, the Charter of the United Nations of 1945. After World War II, people reached a consensus on fundamental values and principles for interacting with one another. The focus was to avoid war, non-violence, respect for and sovereignty of states, the inviolability of borders, and the respect of international treaties.
- To implement this Charter, the founding fathers and mothers of the UN agreed on the creation of the Security Council and a General Assembly. However, this architecture of international law has been imperfect from the outset. The General Assembly was denied executive powers, and the Security Council's ability to act was limited by the veto power of five nuclear powers.
- In recent years, the validity and acceptance of the UN Charter have diminished considerably. Autocratic governments justify their own actions that contradict international law.
- Today we are witnessing “illegal acts of aggression by states” which are in clear breach of the UN Charter. Indeed, the UN Charter only allows the use of force against another state under two strict conditions: (1) in the case of self-defence after an armed attack, or (2) if the UN Security Council explicitly authorizes military action. None of those conditions are met, for example, in recent cases of aggression.
- Even worse is that currently, the breach of international law is becoming the new normal. The actions of the US in Venezuela and in Iran show a dangerous trend: it is becoming increasingly common to use unilateral force as a means of power abroad. This is a precedent that risks normalizing the violation of international law.

- So today, we are faced with a situation where the Charter still is in place, but hardly anyone feels bound by it. Examples are Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, President Trump's claim of ownership of Greenland, and the kidnapping of the president of Venezuela.
- How can this view of autocrats be encountered? The attitude of European Heads of State and Governments during the conflict over Greenland demonstrated that courage, strength, persistence and determination, can convince autocrats. It also highlighted how crucial it is for Europe to insist upon the respect of fundamental international law principles and to stand united against any violations of those basic rules.

The panel stirred up discussions ranging from the legality of the current conflicts in the world, raised basic questions about the current legal system, and enquired what exactly is international law - is it justice, arbitration, or institutions?

Marie Anne Coninx