

# Heart of Glass



**Transcript:**

**Land and People: Divorce of the Epoch**

**with Radha D'Souza (she/her) and Sunera Thobani (she/her)**

**Part of With For About: Care and the Commons**

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Length of audio: 47:36

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**Radha D'Souza:**

I was just wondering if you can have a look at this. You can leave the first two sections because one is in singular and Tamil. The last word is in English. Can you look at this one and what comes to your mind?

What are the questions that come to your mind when you look at this? I'll tell you a bit about the top one says, Ladies and Gents, Changing Facility Complex. Then there is the Hot Water Springs Renovation Project. This building was constructed with the manpower assistance of the 22nd Division of the Sri Lankan Army, was declared open by Major General TTR De Silva, RWP RSP VSP USP PSC, Government Agent of Trincomalee on the invitation of Brigadier Rohita Dharmaserry PSC, General Officer, Commanding 22nd Division, on 20th November 2014.

So that is the text on that. But maybe if you could think about what is it about Hot Water Springs Renovation Project and the manpower assistance of the 22nd Division of the Sri Lankan Army and the Brigadier who was inaugurating it. Those are the key elements. Then, of course, you have the Changing facility complex at the top for ladies and gents. What thoughts come to your mind on this, when you read a plaque like this?

**Audience member 1:**

The hot water springs were there anyway without renovating.

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**Radha D'Souza:**

They were already there and they were without renovating. Any other thoughts that come to mind?

**Audience member 2:**

Why did they need renovating?

**Radha D'Souza:**

Why did they need renovating?

**Audience member 3:**

Perhaps, why was the military involved?

**Radha D'Souza:**

Why was the military involved? Yeah.

**Audience member 4:**

Why is it that we need an extra building and a changing facility complex to access this site.

**Radha D'Souza:**

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To access the spring water site, right.

## **Audience member 5:**

Ownership.

## **Radha D'Souza:**

Yes. Anyway, you see how when you look at this, when I looked at it and I was thinking, and thankfully, I took a picture of it because it was really too complicated for me at the moment, if you like. Anyway, this is a photo that I took when we were in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, the northern areas of Sri Lanka. And as you know, many of you may have followed it to a lesser or greater degree, but the story of the Tamils is they never had any migration history before the British arrived. Now, I feel a bit awkward every time I come to speak at these things and I start with what the British did. But that's the way it is, right? And so there is no migration history.

According to geologists, at another geological time, they say that the Southern Peninsula part of India was a big landmass extending right up to Australia. And then there was a tectonic shift because of natural occurrences. And islands drifted away from the peninsula and then formed Malaysia, that whole region, Southeast Asia, including Australia. And so somehow we are distant cousins, very distant cousins of the Aboriginals. So that's the geological time history story. But the Aboriginals never went anywhere. They were always there. The Tamils never went anywhere until the British decided plantation was a very

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good idea and took people. But that took, only from the Tamils from India. The Tamils from Sri Lanka, they remained there because there are three traditionally Tamil territories. Two in India, one in Sri Lanka. That was the ancient Tamil lands. And ever since, if you like, there's been struggle after struggle of the Tamils for a homeland. This is the main central thing about having a homeland. We want a homeland.

And the coming back to this story, there was, of course, colonialism, which did not give them a homeland because it took away everything. And also established certain structures of the state. And the British did this across South Asia. They just decided some people were good for some kinds of jobs and others were good for other kinds of jobs. And they had classified entire nations. This happened across South Asia, not just here, as what they call the martial races. And the martial races were good for being soldiers. And so they got into the British Army. And there were other races that were good for clerical jobs, and that was the Tamils. You had... And this happens across South Asia. This is not... The Punjabis were the martial races. Sikhs were martial races. Marathas were martial races. And the Brahmans were clerical, administrative, and suitable for administrative work. Bengalese were suitable for administrative work across South Asia. So obviously, on independence, you have all the administrators, the bureaucracy in one community, and the military in another community. This is the structure of state everywhere. And then after independence, what happens?

There is obviously tension between the two because they say we want homeland. That's why we fought for independence, not to remain in the same bureaucracy. And of course,



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the state power so on and so forth. That's the general architecture. And many of us when we talk about civil wars in these countries or conflicts in these countries, we really have a way of speaking very generally about colonial legacies. But what is that legacy? That legacy is that we are put into, penned into certain occupation, certain things, which of course becomes easier. Because if your father has been a general, you continue, you join the army, you become a... And so on and so forth. Now, the homeland conflict. If you see, when we talk... I don't know if many of you were in London in 2009 here, and you would have seen demonstrations day after day after day before the Parliament on the Tamil Genocide, which was quite a major event.

And if you talk to people, they say, Oh, well, these are people from other countries, nothing to do with Britain, nothing to do with us. They can't get on. They have a fight. But why should we get in? And this was the conversation in 2009. And so if at all we get involved in this, it's because we are good people and we don't like genocides. So if people kill each other, we feel we have a moral duty to go and to intervene and sort things out.

Now, before that, again, we talked about the plaque and the thing, and I'm going to come and end with that one. So what happens here? Britain, of course, says you should have liberal democracy, give recognised rights of minority. This is... I'm caricaturing a bit, but this is the language in which most political discourses happen. Have liberal democracy, give minorities rights, have a nice constitution, and then that's what we do. But what we also do is to continue to train their police, which Britain has been doing all along. But of course, that is not something that is responsible. We only train the police. How they then

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police is not our business. And this, of course, happens in other places as well. Saudi Arabia, we sell arms, we train their pilots, but nothing else happens. Now, we like to get involved in peace talks because that makes us good guys. And so there were peace talks. And then the Tamils, of course, wanting homeland. And again, being there were 1960s, there was major revolt by the Tamils. Then again, mid 1980s, 1990s, 2000s. And every time that happens, there's a refugee influx that comes into Europe and Tamils are from a big part of the refugee populations in both UK and elsewhere. And they have come in 1980s, 1990s. They've come in 2000s, they continue to come. And when they continue to come here, we, of course, don't like them. We don't want these people here. Go away because we just want this is our homeland. You want your homeland, be there, sort it out. But you can't take away our homeland, which is being messed up because all these strange people come. And what happens to our homeland? So there are two competing claims on homeland. And it's a legitimate question to ask when Tamils have their homeland, why shouldn't English people have their homeland? So it becomes a tricky one, that one. And I think it's important I want to bring this up because we are living in those times now and we need to have answers. So what happens when this happens. About in 2000, 2002, when the Civil War had gone on for very long, then there was the peacemaking efforts. As I said, we like to be peacemakers because that makes us feel good. We are doing good things.

And there was the Oslo, a repeat of the Oslo Accord that happened for Palestine, that thing, negotiations went on. And the first-person institution to come and actually propose a concrete peace plan was the World Bank. So the World Bank came up with, here's a



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peace plan. If you agree to this, we will fund it, we will finance it, etc, etc. And I remember we even had a symposium at the time to consider that. I wanted to get the introduction to that which I wrote, but I couldn't find it, but never mind that.

Anyway, then Britain comes along and says, actually, we need a base because after Iraq war, there was no military base for the US allies, US, UK allies. After Diego Gracia, if you know the geography which is very much further down, there is no facility right up to Iraq. And Iraq war, they became very conscious that there was no refuelling facility, that their aircraft could not fly and they need. And in India, we had major demonstrations that no airspace should be allowed for the planes to go from Diego Gracia to Iraq. So they had to really find a long way roundabout way. Britain, being having been in that region for centuries, comes back and says, actually, as part of the peace plan, if you include a base in Trincomalee, we will recognise your right for self-determination. And this then becomes a major talking point. And the Tamils say, No, no, sorry, we want our homeland. We don't want Britain coming back again as a military base now, instead of the old power. We just want our self-determination. That is the keyword in this struggle.

So what happens during this whole peace negotiation? All your Oxfam, your World UN missions, your child development, women development projects, all those projects are coming in because now we are going to build the peace. When the Tamils say, sorry, we don't want this. We can accept the World Bank plan, even though we are not very comfortable with World Bank. We know what has happened with structural adjustment, World Bank loans in other parts of the world, but we could possibly live with that for the

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sake of peace because by now the Civil War has gone on for 40 years. But they say no military base because that is bringing Britain straight back into our backyard. What happens then is the UN withdraws from that area. All international forces withdraw from that area and the Sri Lankan Army gets full freedom to go in and have basically what was a slaughter. 200,000 people. And that's a lot of people. People in refugee camps, people in whatever. And obviously, you have another round of migrations.

In the 80s, when the Tamils came here, they were welcomed by them because they were considered the immigration office. In the 90s. Not too much, but still okay. But now, there is a complete ban on all Tamil immigration because all Tamil people are terrorists now. They come under what we call listing prescription of the LTT. And there is, of course, consequences for that. So there is deportation, all kinds of other kinds of violence that goes on, people coming here. Now, they say, I think last year or the year, or the year maybe 2021, there was a Sri Lankan diplomat who made a speech outside the Sri Lankan embassy in London when there was a demonstration of Tamils outside the thing, saying they would all be slaughtered.

And this was a sign that he made and which was captured on now everyone has phones and whatever. But Britain takes no action against a diplomat who clearly violates the diplomatic space. He's not allowed to make political speeches or gestures like that. And then what is happening there is, because now they have won the war and now Britain has decided Tamils are all terrorists, so they are not going to have anything there. And you

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have the army going into the Tamil areas and occupying their lands and coming back to that stone. That was one of those stones that were put up.

What is happening now is that the archaeology department, so everywhere you find that was put up by the archaeology department. And they say this is an ancient monument which we have to protect because that's what archaeology departments do. They protect ancient heritage. So land is now being taken over by the archaeology department in the name of protecting Tamil monuments and histories. As you can see, this spring is an ancient spring, a natural spring, which presumably has existed for a very long time without the 22nd Division of the Sri Lankan Army trying to encircle it. And you have Southampton University, the archaeology department going in, collaborating with Jaffna University. Unfortunately, I did not get to really examine more closely what exactly the archaeological collaboration was between a British university and in an absolute heart of Tamil territory about this.

Now, the reason why I start with this Tamil story is you can see that behind this. And then, of course, because it is done in the name of archaeology, yeah. You can't go to the British government and say, look, you are allowing the Sri Lankan Army to take over land because they're not taking over land. They're just fencing it off to protect the ancient heritage of the Tamils, which every state is supposed to do. It's the same thing when the army marched into the Tamil areas, one of the first thing they did, and we spent a lot of time in the land record office, was to destroy the land records. So now when a Tamil goes back and says, I give my land back and whatever, they say, bring your papers, because

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you can't just go and say, This is my land, and say, I'm a Tamil, of course, but that doesn't mean... So bring your papers, your title. There's no title because the title was destroyed in the war. Quite deliberately. But then to the international, the democracies, civil rights, liberties, that discourse, it appears very natural. Of course, how do you expect someone to return your land if you don't have a title deed? And you can see why the Palestinians cling on to that one piece of paper in spite of everything else they have lost. But that one piece of paper, they cling on to it because... And they travel around the world with that one piece of paper because to the Western mind, that one piece of paper could clinch, could be life or death, could be returning back home or not returning back home. So you can see that how this whole discourse plays out. The reason I start with this Tamil story is, of course, to come back to the relationship of land and people, which is my main subject here. Because homeland is not nation state. Nation state is a different thing. A nation is not citizenship. I think a lot of the times we mix up these concepts and we identify with it because we think the nation state is our homeland. But if you see, the nation state can evict you at any time, even if you are properly from English soil. The nation state can still deprive you of your citizenship if you cross certain boundaries. And that is some of those things that I think distinctions that I want to draw on today.

So I'll now go on to the idea of rights and democracy, which is what I want to really come to. There is an art project that we have done on this called Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes, but I won't go into that. I want to examine this idea of rights because it's so deeply... I mean, I started thinking about it because I've been an activist all my life, and we all do these fantastic campaigns. We do this fantastic research, we do fantastic

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critique, and we come up with this amazing analysis of problems. But when it comes to solutions, we go right back to rights, right back to constitutional democracies. We go, okay, we can tweak things a bit here or there. Maybe we should have a written constitution. Maybe we should get rid of the monarchy. But these are really tweaking at the fringes rather than really coming down. So my thing was, why is it even Indigenous people? Because now we are all modern... Trying. Modernity is not something just limited to Western Europe any longer. It has spread around the world and we all think in that way. So my thing was, what is it about this rights thing that we cannot absolutely get rid of from our imaginaries?

And that is where for me, the question begins with land and people. And I call this the original sin of capitalism. There's an original sin from where a story starts. Adam bit the apple, the rest followed. Consequences followed. And this original sin of capitalism is eviction of people from land. It's forcible, it's violent. It has happened everywhere around the world where modernisation has happened. There is not a single country or region that I am aware of where modernisation has happened without evicting people from land. You have enclosure movements here, which was very violent. You have slavery, very violent eviction of people from land, indigenous people. That is how modernisation begins. Modernisation begins with this, and it is, and I want to push the point, it depends on this separation. I think it's important for us who are talking about how to unify land and people to actually understand what is entailed in this modern life. It is contingent on that separation, and that separation is a violent one. And afterwards, of course, that violence becomes what we call structural violence. But that is because we have all started

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accepting it or thinking, I don't accept this, but I have no other way of living. So why was this original sin absolutely essential to kickstart modernity? And there, if you look at pre modern societies, they were land-centric societies. Patriarchy is a land-centric institution. There are many problems with patriarchy, no doubt about it. But the relationship with nature, serfdom, it is an exploitative relationship. But I'm not talking about exploitation here. How human beings exploit each other. That's not the point. The point is our relationship, human relationship to nature. Because the serf, the peasant, they were very tied to nature. They were not separated from nature. In a land-centric society, you separate...

(I've got five minutes more.)

This is my problem when I start talking. In a land-centric society, it is still land and people. That unity remains. The reason why modernity, which is a commodity centric society, because what all of us do is to produce commodities. So why is it that for a commodity producing society, it becomes necessary to remove people from land? Because without that, land does not become property and therefore saleable, therefore circulation in the market, and people cannot become labour power. So it is this separation that establishes one of the most central features of modern society, which is nature becomes property, which can be bought and sold, and people become labour power. So you have labour market and you have a land market and you have carbon markets and you have all kinds of markets. And this separation then becomes the basis of rights and liberal democracy. Why? Because once it is separated, everything in this world exists because we apply our



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labour to nature. There's nothing that is created, nothing that is made if we don't apply our labour, capacity to work to nature. That's how everything is produced. Now, having separated this two forcibly, it has to be put together. How do you put that together?

We have a whole set of modern institutions and modern legal systems which comes with modernisation that creates right-bearing people. The architecture of rights is the architecture of contracts. Because to have a contract, you need to have somebody who can buy and somebody who has the right to sell, and then you have a contract. All commodity production relies on this architecture of exchange, which is contractual, and rights are central to that. What they say is, and if you have rights, then you have some proprietary capacity over that. But the fact is, if you want nature and people to be united, you don't want proprietary rights. You just want the right to be there. You don't want citizenship. You want homeland so that I belong there. That's my home. My ancestors, my future generations will be there. But good, bad, all those things, nothing is ever perfect and people are never 100% happy everywhere. We shouldn't imagine idyllic, heavenly places because that doesn't exist. But the unity of nature and people, which is fundamental to human existence, when that shifts and that becomes saleable commodities, today there is somebody else, tomorrow Sainsbury's is going to take over forest, somebody else is going to... And when that happens, there is no stability in anything in life because anything can happen. Today you think you bought a house, your children are going to grow up there. You can have a development project in your backyard and that will be gone. And this sense then creates in us so much anxiety. It has emotional, social, psychological, cultural, whole raft of things. That when you see that refugee on the boat coming in, there are two ways. There is a part of humanity that says, Oh, this is

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terrible. And then there is another part, What am I going to do with my job? My children need jobs. These people will come and work for half the price. So you have a problem there. So there is no aspect of life where this does not come in tension. And that is one of the reasons I think we keep talking in circles because then what do you do? Do you have better immigration law? No, but we are going to give. So every time you go, you vote once for somebody who's going to have humane immigration laws, and then there are jobs and other people shouting about unemployment, but we can't deal with that because remember, selling your labour power is holy cow. You can't do anything about it. And so you have this thing.

I think one of the challenges that we have now, we've come a full circle because European modernity, European Enlightenment started out with this premise of redefining the relationship of people and land. And we have seen that this has now brought us to a crisis of global proportions that involves nature. The climate crisis concerns nature. And the immigration crisis, which concerns human beings. And both of them are actually closely connected. We go and bomb them, they come here. Our corporations go and take their land, they come here. When they come here, we say, Oh, don't come here. But we are not able to say, therefore, we will not bomb you. Because 45,000 jobs in that nuclear submarine. I mean, if you look at the debate that's happened with Corbyn's thing, unions were the biggest supporters of Corbyn. But when the nuclear submarine issue came in, the Union said that we can't cancel it because it means 45,000 jobs. So you see how this thing goes in circles. So I think one of the challenges for us is really how can we break this vicious cycle and how can we start thinking about issues, whatever the field of work,

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whether you're an artist or whether you are a school teacher or whether you are whatever it is that you're doing, that this thing, my freedom depends on your freedom. I can't be free if you are not free.

And how do you get that conception of freedom and related to land and people? It has nothing to do with color of skin, I think, except of course, in the present society, the debate is about the color of our skin. But if a Somali family were to live here for two, three generations, they would just be part of everybody else. There might be a mixed culture, a syncretic culture emerging out of it. But we don't allow that to happen. We don't allow that because that's how we keep the prices of labour markets down. This is a very mundane economic argument, but it's an economic argument that we all every day have to negotiate.

But unfortunately, I think that's all the time I have. So I'll stop here and then maybe in the listening sessions, we can pick up some of the things. Thank you.

## **Sunera Thobani:**

That was, of course, a very rich talk and very layered. I want to just pick up on some of the key issues that you're flagging as absolutely crucial for us to attend to. Then I'll maybe reflect on your comments by looking at my work on those same issues. Rights and the relationship of land to people is absolutely crucial. There's just no way that we can really really solve any of the problems of the present, including not just the ecological crisis, but

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also the migration crisis. I think bringing those together in the same framework is really crucial. Also, the importance of understanding the state, the structure of the state, but also the logic of the state, which keeps replaying itself out at different moments in time, and I think what you also pointed to is the absolute necessity to understand the structure of the nation because the nation is not some natural entity that just forms by itself but it's actually the state that continues to produce, reproduce the nation in a particular way, a nation that can then demand its own homeland. Of course, none of these processes are static. They keep changing over time.

So I will speak to it from my perspective in having done my research on Canada. Many of the similar issues when you talk about what the British did, you cannot not look at North America, the US, Canada, in terms of the ongoing legacies of that period. When you begin with you know your story about the army reclaiming a hot spring site, in Canada, we're going through a similar position, but it's a different level, where the state is now partnering with indigenous peoples because it recognizes that indigenous peoples have this relationship with the land. They have been protectors, defenders of the land, of all of the creatures. The cosmologies, the world view is something that highlights human, nonhuman relations. Because of the direction in which industrialisation technologies have taken us, Indigenous Peoples are now recognised by the Canadian state as having preserved particular forms of knowledges which are going to be crucial to dealing with the crisis around fisheries, for example, the overfishing destruction of fish stocks. Indigenous people started on their reservations, bringing back the salmon. The projects that they initiated were so successful that the Canadian state now wants to partner with Indigenous

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Peoples. It sees these knowledges that have been preserved by Indigenous Peoples as something that Canada can then gain expertise in and then provide it to countries around the world. Even the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples has been changing very dramatically.

Of course, in Canada, the destruction of Indigenous Peoples genocide, physical cultural genocide has been the basis of building the Canadian nation state. That was through historically, of course, constructing Indigenous Peoples as they were in other parts of the world, as modern, "savages", all of those racialised terminologies, and racialised basically in the logic of the Canadian state as doomed to extinction. These were seen as peoples who can't make the transition to modernity. Unfortunately, it would be their fate that they would not be able to make the transition into modernity. Of course, indigenous people's lands was taken away on this basis. Indigenous people were put into reservations, and they made those sites, the reservations, which was supposed to be the sites of their elimination, the sites of rejuvenation, remaking community, rebuilding community. And Indigenous Peoples now, of course, because of the resistance that they have organised at the international level through the UN, have become a strong enough force that the Canadian state now has to deal with Indigenous presence, growing population in the country, highest birth rate in Canada, youngest population in terms of young people, largest population in terms of young people. These sites of destruction were turned into sites of rejuvenation, life building, community making. The foundation of Canada, of course, relied on the migration of initially the British and French to build the Canadian nation. That was a racialised project. Indigenous Peoples were racialised as doomed to

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extinction. British and French as building this nation, bringing civilization into the wilderness. You're all familiar with that discourse. But labor, Indigenous People by being pushed onto reservations, there was, of course, need for labor to develop the economy. This is where third world migrants were brought in, Chinese, South Asians, but they were racialised as outsiders interlopers who want what Canadians have. That is basically the fundamental logic of the Canadian state. It keeps playing itself out at different moments.

The issue of rights is crucial to this. Dispossession of indigenous people, no recognition of any rights or entitlements, rights and entitlements of Canadian nationals as citizens, British and French, the real citizens, and immigrants seen as outsiders who would provide labour but would not be entitled to the same rights, same level of citizenship. That is also the structure of the nation, a racialised nation which continues to reproduce itself in different moments. Of course, 1970s, we see because of all of the post independence changes taking place across the third world, indigenous struggles, there is a remaking of the Canadian state from that outright racialised structure into, quote unquote, liberal democracy. But this liberal democracy is that that continues to marginalize indigenous peoples, recognise only on certain issues and manage them through the Indian Act. If citizenship is offered to indigenous people, it is offered to them as individuals, and they have to give up their indigenous rights, their inherent rights, to become Canadian citizens. And so for indigenous people, citizenship and rights is defined as the final solution because that is the total decimation of indigenous rights. For immigrants, of course, we are racialised as outsiders. You could be third, fourth generation by now and still be



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designated by the state officially as immigrant communities. So, immigrant really is a racialized term that refers to non white bodies who continue to be produced as outsiders.

(I'm running out of time.)

This is what liberal democracy looks like in Canada. This is how Canada actually presents itself as a model for both in terms of indigenous governance, but also now the joint project, joint partnerships with indigenous people through processes of reconciliation. In terms of immigrant communities, the discourse continues to racialise immigrants as outsiders. This discourse, of course, becomes fully targeted against those who look like Muslims after the 911 attack. Canada joins with the US to become a partner in the global war on terror. In the occupation of Afghanistan, Canada is a key player with the US and of course, the British as well. In Canada, going through the same period, you would never feel this was a country at war. This was a country occupied in occupation in Afghanistan. What we see is the demonisation of those who look like Muslims, black and brown bodies. The surge of police violence that we see against black people in the US and in Canada cannot be understood outside of this racialisation and the construction of those who look like Muslims as terrorists. The whole policing of the immigration system, the militarisation of the borders, none of that can be understood outside of this racial logics, which at the point of the war on terror, focused firmly on the body of the Muslim. We saw this happening in India as well, Gujarat Genocide. We see how this racial politics are also shifting. The anti immigrant, anti refugee discourses coalesce on black and brown bodies as a threat to the

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nation. As you said, we go and bomb there, they come here. We want to try and keep them out.

The point I'm trying to make here is that the situation that you are describing in terms of Sri Lanka, in terms of South Asia, speaks to the fundamental logic of this global international order which has been hierarchised through this hierarchy of nations, classes, races. And that is the fundamental logic that we need to be thinking about. Claiming the commons, what does that mean? Who gets to claim the commons? Indigenous people are not getting their lands back. Yes, they have some increased treaty rights. The Canadian state wants reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples, wants to harvest the knowledge is Indigenous Peoples have preserved. Meanwhile, the land itself is getting more and more destroyed.

We have had tremendous climate crisis in Canada. The week before I came here, heat wave in Vancouver. The point around the land is that that is also now fundamentally changing. That means that Indigenous people's relationships to the land also has to change because nonhuman beings are destroyed. They are being destroyed at such an alarming level. The idea of indigenous knowledge as somehow locked in some pure space or indigenous identity as somehow locked in some pure essential space that cannot hold anymore. All of these social relationships between these different communities are changing. What we can't get past is addressing the basic logic that structures that society. It is that foundational logic that needs to change.

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The point you're making is absolutely vital. Reclaiming the commons has to mean abolition of private property. That is the logic that ties these issues together.

Thank you.