

Captain Cook's Climate

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I would like to pay my respects to the elders both past and present of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation on whose land we gather tonight.

Tonight I will be speaking about the need to change our cultural stories so that they cease to pit us against one another and the earth. And our greatest teachers in this process of transformation must be the Indigenous people who have kept their stories and practices of right relationship alive for tens of thousands of years.

Thank you David Hirsch, for this tremendous honour, and thanks to the members of the jury of the Sydney Peace Prize.

Thank you Sen. Patrick Dodson, for your words and all of your work.

And my deepest gratitude to everyone who is gracing the stage tonight, especially the artists.

I want to thank my husband Avi Lewis, my great collaborator in all things. And our four year old son Toma, who is here and doing his very best to behave.

I also want to acknowledge the many land and water warriors in this room – fighting to protect territory in this country from coal mining, fracking and oil drilling – and who are protecting the planet as a whole from disastrous warming in the process.

As I was making notes for this lecture over the past couple of weeks, I knew I really should be preparing two versions – the “Hillary-wins” version, and the “Trump-wins” version.

Thing is, I couldn't quite bring myself to write the Trump-wins version. My typing fingers went on strike. In retrospect, I was derelict in my duties. So I apologize if what follows seems rushed – it is rushed. A “hot-take” as they call it these days, on a hot planet.

If there is a single, overarching lesson in the Trump victory, perhaps it is this: never, ever underestimate the power of hate. Never underestimate the power of direct appeals to power-over “the other”: the migrant, the Muslim, Blacks, us ladies. Especially during times of economic hardship.

Because when large numbers of white men find themselves hurting and insecure, and those men were raised in a social system built on elevating their humanity over the others, a lot of them get mad. And there is nothing wrong in itself with being mad – there’s lots to be mad about.

But within a culture that so systematically elevates some lives over others, anger makes many of those men –and women – putty in the hands of whatever demagogue of the moment is offering to deliver back an illusion of dominance, however fleeting. Build a wall. Lock ’em up. Deport them all – for life. Grab ’em wherever you like and show ’em who’s boss.

What other lessons can we take from our two-day-old reality that we now live in a world with a President-elect Trump?

One lesson: that the economic pain is real and not going anywhere. Four decades of corporate neoliberal policies of privatization, deregulation, free trade and austerity has made sure of that.

Another lesson: leaders who represent that failed consensus are no match for the demagogues and neo-fascists. They have nothing tangible to offer and they are seen – quite correctly -- as the people responsible for much of this economic pain.

Only a bold and genuinely redistributive agenda has a hope of speaking to that pain and directing it where it belongs: the politician-purchasing elites who benefitted so extravagantly from the auctioning off of public wealth; the polluting of land, air and water; and the deregulation of the financial sphere.

But there is a deeper lesson that we must urgently learn from this week’s events: if we want to win against the likes of Trump, and every country has their Trump, we must urgently confront and battle racism and misogyny -- in our culture, in our movements, in ourselves.

This cannot be an afterthought, it cannot be an add-on. It is central to how someone like Trump could rise to power. Many people said they voted for him *despite* his objectionable race and gender pronouncements. They liked what he had to say about trade and bringing back manufacturing and that he wasn’t a “Washington insider.”

Sorry but that doesn't cut it. You cannot cast a ballot for someone who is so openly riling up race, gender and physical-ability based hatreds unless, on some level, you think those issues aren't that important. That those other lives matter less than yours. You just can't do it. You can't do it unless you are willing to sacrifice "the other" for your (hoped for) gain.

But this isn't just about Trump voters and the stories they may have told themselves. We have arrived at this dangerous moment also because of the stories about "the other" told on the progressive side of the political spectrum. Like the one that holds that when we fight against war and climate change and economic inequality, it will benefit Black people and Indigenous people the most because they are most victimized by the current system.

That doesn't work either. There is too long and too painful a track record of left movements for economic justice leaving workers of colour, Indigenous people, and women's labour out in the cold.

To build a truly inclusive movement, there needs to be a truly inclusive vision that starts with and is led by the most brutalized and excluded. Rinaldo Walcott, a great Canadian writer and intellectual, issued a challenge a couple months ago to white liberals and leftists. He wrote:

"Black people are dying in our cities, crossing oceans, in resource wars not of our making.... Indeed, it is obvious that Black peoples' lives are disposable in a way and fashion that is radically different from other groups globally.

"It is from this stark reality of marginalization that I want to propose that any new policy actions in the North American context ought to pass what I will call the Black test. The Black test is simple: it demands that any policy meet the requirement of ameliorating the dire conditions of Black peoples' lives... When a policy does not meet this test, then it is a failed policy, from the first instance of its proposal."

That's worth thinking hard about. I know that my work has too often failed to pass that test. But now more than ever, those of us who talk about peace, justice and equality must rise to that challenge.

When it comes to climate action, it's abundantly clear that we will not build the power necessary to win unless we embed justice – particularly racial but also gender and economic justice – at the centre of our low carbon policies.

Intersectionality (as the kids these days call it) is the only path forward. We cannot play "my crisis is more urgent than your crisis": war trumps climate; climate

trumps class; class trumps gender; gender trumps race. That trumping game, my friends, is how you end up with a Trump.

Either we fight for a future in which everyone belongs, starting with those being most battered by injustice and exclusion today, or we will keep losing. And there is no time for that. Moreover, when we make these connections among issues – climate, capitalism, colonialism, slavery -- there is a kind of relief. Because it actually is all connected, all part of the same story.

I was feeling this very intensely last week when I visited the Great Barrier Reef. Some of you may have seen the short film we made with the terrific team from The Guardian.

Floating in the waters off of Port Douglas, looking at a whole lot of bleached and dead coral, I found myself thinking, as one does, about Captain James Cook. Thinking about all of these forces that came together right around the time that the HMS Endeavour navigated those very waters.

As all you good students of Australian history know, Cook arrived in Queensland in 1770. Just six years later, the Watts commercial steam engine went on the market, a machine that massively accelerated the industrial revolution, now powered by a potent combination of slave labour in the colonies and coal. That same year – 1776 – Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, the textbook on contemporary capitalism. Just in time for the United States to declare its independence from Britain.

Colonialism, slavery, coal, capitalism – all tightly bound up together, creating the modern world.

This country called Australia was born precisely at the dawn of fossil fuelled capitalism. We should connect the dots because they are connected – the land grabs, the changing climate, the economic and social theories that rationalized it all. We are all living, in a very real sense, in Captain Cook's climate, or at least the one he played an absolutely central part in creating.

One detail that particularly struck me in my research for this lecture: the HMS Endeavour didn't start life as a Navy or scientific vessel, tasked with unlocking astrological and biological mysteries -- and, in its spare time, claiming vast swaths of territory for the British Crown without Indigenous consent.

No, the HMS Endeavour was built in 1764 to haul coal through British waterways. When the Navy bought it, the boat had to be extensively (and expensively) retrofitted to be suited for Cook and Joseph Banks' voyage. And it seems fitting

that the ship that laid claim to New South Wales and Queensland started life as a coal vessel.

Is it any wonder your government has an unnatural love affair with coal? Is it any wonder that not even the catastrophic bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef – one of the wonders of the world – has inspired Queensland’s government to rethink its reliance on coal?

As Vandana Shiva said when accepting this prize six years ago, the roots of our crisis lie “in an economy which fails to respect ecological and ethical limits.” Limits are a problem for our economic system. Ours is a culture of endless taking, as if there was no end and no consequences. A culture of grabbing, and going.

And now this grab-and-go culture has reached its logical conclusion. The most powerful nation on earth has elected Donald Trump as its grabber in chief.

A man who openly brags about grabbing women without their consent. Who says about the invasion of Iraq, “We should have taken their oil.” International law be damned.

This rampant grabbing is not just a Trump thing, of course. We have an epidemic of grabbing. Land grabbing. Resource grabbing. Even grabbing the sky by polluting so much that there is no atmospheric space left for the poor to develop.

And now we are hitting the wall of maximum grabbing. That’s what climate change is telling us. That’s what our endless wars are telling us. That’s what Trump is telling us. That it’s time to put everything we have into shifting from a culture of endless taking to a culture of consent and caretaking.

Caring for the planet, and for one another.

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It’s so good to be with you all during these difficult times.

When I learned that I had been awarded the Sydney Peace Prize for my climate work, I was incredibly honoured. This is a prize that has gone to some of my personal heroes – Arundhati Roy, Noam Chomsky, Vandana Shiva, Desmond Tutu among so many others. It’s a very nice tribe to be a part of.

So I was thrilled to receive the call. But after that wore off a bit, the doubts surfaced. One was: why me? My writing builds on the work of so many thousands

of climate justice activists around the world, many who have been at it for far longer than I.

Another doubt was more practical: can I really justify the transportation pollution required to accept an award for doing my bit to fight pollution? To be perfectly honest with you, I'm still not sure I can justify it.

But I consulted with Australian friends and colleagues. They pointed out that your government is the number #1 coal exporter in the world, selling directly to those countries whose emissions are growing most rapidly. That you are well on your way to playing the same leading role for liquefied natural gas.

Even as other countries freeze and wind down their coal production, your Prime Minister is defiant. He says the plan is to stay the course with coal “for many, many decades to come” – long past the time when we all need to be off that dirty fuel if the Paris climate goals have a chance of being met.

Canada, under our last Prime Minister, used to provide some rather unhealthy competition for Australia in this arena. But now Justin Trudeau, our hot new Prime Minister, is at least saying some of the right things, if not doing enough of them.

Earlier this week, I said that Australia stands increasingly alone in raising its sooty middle finger to the world. Unfortunately, I now have to amend that statement: starting in January, when Donald Trump moves into the White House, Malcolm Turnbull will have some company. Ouch.

The Australian friends whom I consulted told me that having the megaphone that comes with this prize could help support their work. Crucial work to stop new fossil fuel projects like the gargantuan Carmichael coal mine on Wangan and Jagalingou territory. And to stop the Northern Gas Pipeline, which would open up vast areas of the Northern Territory to industrial fracking.

This resistance is of global importance because these mega projects concern massive pools of what we now call “unburnable carbon” – carbon dioxide and methane that, if extracted and burned, will not only blow past Australia's paltry climate commitments but blow the global carbon budget as well.

The math on this is very clear: in Paris, our governments (even yours) agreed to a goal of keeping warming below 2 degrees Celsius while pursuing “efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C.”

That goal – and it’s an ambitious one -- places all of humanity within the confines of a carbon budget. That’s the total amount of carbon that can be emitted if we want to hit those targets and give island nations a fighting chance of surviving.

And what we now know, thanks to breakthrough research from Oil Change International in Washington DC, is that if we were to burn all the oil, gas and coal from fields and mines already in production, we would very likely pass 2 degrees of warming and would certainly pass 1.5.

What we cannot do, under any circumstances, is precisely what the fossil fuel industry is determined to do and what your government is so intent on helping them to do: dig *new* coal mines, open *new* fracking fields, and sink *new* offshore drilling rigs. All of that needs to stay in the ground.

What we must do is clear: carefully wean ourselves off of existing fossil fuel projects, at the same time as we rapidly ramp up renewables until we get to 100 per cent by mid-century. The good news is that we can do it with existing technologies. The good news is that we can create millions of well-paying jobs around the world in the shift to a post-carbon economy – in renewables, in public transit, in efficiency, in retrofits, in cleaning up polluted land and water.

The better news is that, as we transform how we generate energy and how we move ourselves around, we have a once-in-a-century opportunity to build a society that is fairer on every front, and where everyone is valued.

Here’s how we do it. We make sure that, wherever possible, our renewable energy comes from community controlled providers and cooperatives, so that decisions about land use are made democratically and profits from energy production are used to pay for much needed services.

We know that our reliance on dirty energy over the past couple hundred years has taken its highest toll on the poorest and most vulnerable people, overwhelmingly people of colour, many Indigenous. That’s whose lands have been stolen and poisoned by mining. That’s who get the most polluting refineries and power plants in their neighbourhoods.

So we can and must insist that Indigenous and other frontline communities be first in line to receive public funds to own and control their own green energy projects - - with the jobs, profits and skills staying in those communities.

This has been a central demand of the climate justice movement, led by communities of colour. This is already starting to happen on an ad hoc basis. But too often, it is left to already underfunded communities to raise the money.

That is upside down: climate justice means they are owed public funds as a drop in the ocean of reparation.

A few months ago, the Movement For Black Lives in the United States released a sweeping platform, filled with specific policies that would get at the root of the many forms of violence visited on black lives. It included many ideas for these kinds of climate justice policies.

Climate justice also means that workers in high carbon sectors -- many of whom have sacrificed their health in coal mines and oil refineries – must be full and democratic participants in this justice based transition. The guiding principle must be: no worker left behind.

For the past two days in Canberra, the Australian trade union movement has been meeting to plot and plan for precisely this kind of transition.

Here are a couple of examples from my country. There is a group of oil workers in the Alberta tar sands, who have started an organization called Iron and Earth – they are calling on our government to retrain laid-off oil workers and put them back to work installing solar panels, starting with public buildings like schools. It's an elegant idea, and almost everyone who hears about it supports it.

Our postal workers union, meanwhile, has been facing a push to shut down offices, restrict mail delivery, and maybe even sell off the whole service to FedEx. Austerity as usual.

But instead of fighting for the best deal they can get under this failed logic, they have put together a visionary plan for every post office in the country to become a hub for the green transition – a place where you can recharge electric vehicles; do an end-run around the big banks and get a loan to start an energy co-op; and where the entire delivery fleet is not only electric and made-in-Canada but delivers more than mail. It delivers locally grown produce and checks in on the elderly.

These are bottom-up, democratically conceived plans for a justice-based transition off fossil fuels. And we need them multiplied around the world.

Sounds pricey, you say? Good thing we live in a time of unprecedented private wealth. For starters, we can and must take the profits from the dying days of fossil fuels and spend them on climate justice. To subsidize free public transit and affordable renewable power. To help poor nations leapfrog over fossil fuels and go straight to renewables. To support migrants displaced from their lands by oil wars, bad trade deals, drought and other worsening impacts of climate change, as well

the poisoning of their lands by mining companies, many based in wealthy countries.

And we can also invest the profits from pollution in the sectors that are already low carbon. I'm not just talking about green technology. Teaching is low carbon. Caring for the sick is low carbon. Making art and public interest media is pretty low carbon.

So let's invest in those sectors – the ones that tangibly improve our quality of life and create more caring societies -- instead of hacking away at them in the name of that manufactured crisis called “austerity.”

The bottom line is this: as we get clean, we have got to get fair. More than that, as we get clean, we can begin to redress the founding crimes of our nations. Land theft. Genocide. Slavery. Yes, the hardest stuff. Because we haven't just been procrastinating climate action all these years. We've been procrastinating and delaying the most basic demands of justice and reparation. And we are out of time.

All of this should be done because it's right and just, but also because it's smart. The hard truth is: environmentalists can't win the emission reduction fight on our own. It's not a slight against anyone – the lift is just too heavy. This transformation represents a revolution in how we live, work and consume.

To win that kind of change, it will take powerful alliances with every arm of the progressive coalition: trade unions, migrant rights, Indigenous rights, housing rights, transit, teachers, nurses, doctors, artists. To change everything, it takes everyone.

And to build that kind of coalition, it's got to be about justice. Economic justice. Racial justice. Gender justice. Migrant justice. Historical justice. Not as afterthoughts but as animating principles.

And that will only happen when we take real leadership from those most impacted. Murrawah Johnson, an amazing young Indigenous leader who is at the heart of the struggle against the Carmichael Mine, put it very well the other night here in Sydney: “People need to learn to be led.”

Not because it's “politically correct” -- but because justice in the here and now is the only thing that has ever motivated popular movements to throw heart and soul into struggle.

I'm not talking about going to a march or signing a petition, though there is a place for that. I'm talking about the sustained, daily and long-haul work of social

transformation. It's the thirst for justice – the desperate bodily *need* for justice -- that builds movements like that.

We need warriors in this fight and warriors don't step up *against* the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere, not on its own anyway. Warriors step up *for* clean water, for good schools, for desperately needed decent paying jobs, for fully accessible healthcare, for the reunification of families separated by war and cruel immigration policies.

You already know that there will be no peace without justice – that's the core principle of the Sydney Peace Foundation. But here is what we need to understand just as well: there is no climate change breakthrough without justice either.

Perhaps I should apologize for this kind of battle talk at a peace prize. But we have to be clear that this is a fight, one in desperate need of a warrior spirit. Because as much as humanity has to win in this battle, the fossil fuel companies have a hell of a lot to lose. Trillions in income represented by all that unburnable carbon. Carbon in their current reserves and in the new reserves they are spending tens of billions to search out every year.

And the politicians who have thrown their lot in with these interests have a lot to lose too. Campaign donations, sure. The benefit of that revolving door between elected office and the extractive sector too.

But maybe most importantly, the money that comes when you don't have to think or plan – just dig. Right now Australia is getting windfall profits from exporting coal to China. It's not the only way to fill government coffers but it's most certainly the laziest: no pesky industrial planning, no tax or royalty increases on the corporations and billionaires with the resources to buy limitless attack ads.

All you have to do is hand out the permits, roll back some environmental laws, put new draconian restrictions on protest, call legitimate court challenges “green lawfare,” trash the greenies non-stop in the Murdoch press, and you are good to go.

It is this cozy set up that the Indigenous rights and climate justice movement threatens to upend. Which is why we shouldn't be surprised by the scathing assessment offered just last month by Michael Forst, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders. After a visit to Australia, he wrote that:

“I was astonished to observe mounting evidence of a range of accumulative measures that have levied enormous pressure on Australian civil society... I was

astounded to observe what has become frequent public vilification of rights defenders by senior government officials, in a seeming attempt to discredit, intimidate and discourage them from their legitimate work.” And he went on.

It is striking that many of the people doing the most crucial work in this country -- protecting the most vulnerable people and defending fragile ecologies from industrial onslaught -- are facing a kind of dirty war. And we know all too well that it doesn't take much for this kind of political and media war to turn into a physical war, with very real casualties.

We see it around the world when land defenders try to stop mines and mega dams – it's been eight months since Berta Caceras, one the great environmental and Indigenous rights heroes of our time, was assassinated in her home in Honduras.

We see the same thing when communities in India and the Philippines have tried to stop coal power stations because they are a threat to their water and wetlands. Not a metaphorical war, but real war, with lethal live ammunition fired into the bodies of protestors.

According to Global Witness, this worldwide war is getting worse: They report, that “More than three people were killed a week in 2015 defending their land, forests and rivers against destructive industries.... These numbers are shocking, and evidence that the environment is emerging as a new battleground for human rights. Across the world industry is pushing ever deeper into new territory.... Increasingly communities that take a stand are finding themselves in the firing line of companies' private security, state forces and a thriving market for contract killers.”

About 40 per cent of the victims, they estimate, are Indigenous.

And let us not tell ourselves that this only happens in so-called developing nations. We are seeing the war for the planet escalate right now in the United States, in North Dakota, where police who look like they stepped off the battlefield in Fallujah brutally repress a non-violent Indigenous movement of water protectors.

The Standing Rock Sioux are trying to stop a massive oil pipeline that poses a very real threat to their water supply and, if built, would help hurtle us towards planet-destabilizing warming. For this, unarmed land defenders have been shot with rubber bullets, sprayed with pepper spray and other gasses, blasted with sound cannons, attacked by dogs, put in what have been described as dog kennels, strip searched and arrested.

My fear is that the vilification of land defenders that we are seeing here in Australia – all the various and overlapping attempts at delegitimization, layered on top of openly racist portrayals of Indigenous people in the media, coupled with an increasingly draconian security state – prepares the ground for attacks like these.

So though I continue to feel queasy about the carbon I burned on the flight, I am more than happy to be here, if only to play the role of the confused foreign meddler. The one saying: “hold up a minute. We know where this leads and this is a dangerous path you are going down.” This beautiful and beautifully diverse country deserves better.

Oh, and this idea that your coal is somehow a humanitarian gift to India’s poor? That has to stop. India is suffering more under coal pollution and the climate change it fuels than almost anywhere else on earth. A few months ago, it was so hot in Delhi that some of the roads melted. Since 2013, more than 4,000 Indians have died in heat waves. This week, they closed all the schools in Delhi because pollution was so thick they had to declare an emergency.

Meanwhile, the price of solar has plummeted and is now a more viable option for electrification than coal, especially because it requires less infrastructure and lends itself so well to community control.

I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised by your government’s attempts to package coal as a poverty alleviation program – this is the same gang who markets the hell holes on Manus and Nauru as humanitarian programs exclusively designed to save migrants from dying at sea. Bleeding heart do-gooders, all of them.

But you don’t really need me to tell you this. Australia has some of the most incredible climate justice and migrant rights activists in the world. And it is such an honour to be honoured by you.

One small way of expressing the fact that I know my work rests on the labour and sacrifices so many others is to redistribute the generous prize money. So Avi and I will be setting up a mechanism to get it to frontline groups fighting pipelines and mega dams and also building justice based alternatives.

I feel most comfortable doing this in Canada since that’s where our strongest relationships are – and it will help because a lot of environmental funders are currently pulling back, convinced that our new Prime Minister is an environmental Adonis.

But I do hope that this small gesture inspires others here in Australia to think about how to do more to support Black and brown climate justice leaders who are

on the frontlines of both extraction and deep alternatives. As Murrawah Johnson said the other night: they don't need to be saved, or spoken for – they need the resources to do both for themselves.

I'd like to end tonight with some words from a man who we lost today. Leonard Cohen, one of the all time greats in the Tower of Song. Most people didn't know it but Leonard was passionate about climate justice: he was one of the very first people to sign The Leap Manifesto, a grassroots climate justice blueprint that our corporate media cast as dangerous and radical. But Leonard had no qualms about putting his name to it.

His last album, released just a couple of weeks ago, is a masterwork. It is so good that somehow we all knew it was a parting gift.

I'll leave you with the first verse from "Steer Your Way"

*Steer your way through the ruins of the Altar and the Mall
Steer your way through the fables of Creation and The Fall
Steer your way past the Palaces that rise above the rot
Year by year
Month by month
Day by day
Thought by thought*

Thank you