



The spotless kingdom: What the 'clean' countries conceal



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I have been travelling through Britain these past weeks, speaking at Cambridge, at Oxford, and in the British Parliament on freedom, self-knowledge, and the climate crisis. Last Friday evening, at the London School of Economics, I sat in dialogue with Professor Jonathan Birch on animal sentience. Professor Birch's research informed recent animal welfare legislation, and in matters of animal protection, Britain is counted among the leading nations of the world.

That same evening, I went to Richmond Park, the great royal park on the edge of London. Dusk was settling. Deer grazed on the open grass without a trace of fear; rabbits darted out of the undergrowth. At first sight the park seems

to announce something admirable about the society that maintains it. Look, it says, how free these animals are, how protected! Then I learned that every year, roughly two hundred deer are killed in this very park, methodically, as a matter of policy. Richmond Park was enclosed in 1637 by Charles I as a hunting ground, and the deer were brought in for exactly that purpose. They are not native to this ground; they were imported for royal 'sport'. The centuries passed, the hunting stopped, but the deer remained inside the same walls. Now, when their numbers grow, the growth is described as a problem, and the killing is described as management. First, uproot an animal from its habitat and settle it elsewhere for your entertainment. Next, declare the settlement you created to be an ecological problem, and offer killing as its solution. The killing itself is conducted at night, in silence, so that no visitor strolling through the park the next morning has the faintest idea of what happened there in the dark.

The park photographs beautifully, and that is precisely what should give one pause. A scene can look clean for two very different reasons: because the dirt has been removed, or because the dirt has been hidden. What the park and its deer communicate is not love of animals but the performance of it. Real affection for these creatures would never have tolerated the arrangement in the first place: brought here for slaughter, kept here for display, killed here for convenience. The welfare legislation is real, the research behind it is rigorous, and the killing continues regardless.

The developed world speaks a particular vocabulary: clean energy, clean technology, clean growth. Listen to this vocabulary carefully, because it contains a confession its speakers did not intend to make.

The moment a technology is called 'clean' because it emits less

carbon, a definition has been established. Cleanliness now means low carbon; dirt now means high carbon. That definition did not come from the Global South; it was authored and institutionalised by the developed nations themselves. Very well then; let the definition be applied consistently. If it holds for a machine, it must also hold for the society that runs the machine. Apply it, and the world's moral geography rearranges itself. The global average for per-capita carbon emissions stands at roughly 4.9 tonnes a year. Saudi Arabia sits near 22.8 tonnes, Australia at 22.3, Canada at 19.8, Russia at 18, the United States at 17.3. India's figure is about two tonnes per person, among the lowest of any major economy on earth, and that figure belongs to a country carrying a fifth of humanity. By the developed world's own chosen metric, the country so long dismissed as unclean stands in the front rank of the world's clean nations.

A clarification is necessary here. Nothing said so far is an indictment of any particular people, because the tendency being described is universal, and India supplies its own evidence. Watch an Indian abroad. The same person who tosses litter onto his own street without a second thought becomes, in London or Singapore, a scrupulous follower of every rule. He queues, sorts his rubbish, waits for the signal. His nationality has not changed between the two cities; his circumstances have. The change came from outside pressure rather than inner intent: from fear of fines, from surveillance, from the social shame of being seen.

Remove the pressure and the old habit walks straight back in. So the matter was never one of nation or race; it is one of circumstance, and beneath circumstance, of the ego, which bows readily to external pressure while remaining untouched within. The fine, the camera, and the disapproving glance can all discipline behaviour; none of them has ever reached the one behaving. That is why the discipline travels so poorly, evaporating the moment the enforcement does. So the real question was never whether the cleanliness exists. Anyone can see that it exists; the lawns of London are proof enough. The question is what the cleanliness proceeds from. Cleanliness born of fear departs when the fear departs, and the kind born of law breaks wherever the law cannot see. As for the cleanliness maintained for display, it does not remove dirt at all; it relocates dirt to wherever the audience isn't looking, which is exactly what the emissions data and the nighttime culls of Richmond Park describe in their different vocabularies. Had there been real love of cleanliness, the response to dirt would have been its removal rather than its concealment.

The industry's demand would have been reduced rather than its address changed. The deer would never have needed the darkness. Every one of these arrangements testifies to the same thing, which is that the claim of love remains, so far, a performance of love. So what, then, does real cleanliness actually mean? The ego is the performer. The ego is the dirt within, and the same ego is what dirties the world without; a polluted interior can polish its exterior endlessly and produce nothing except dirt with a better complexion. That evening in Richmond Park stays with me. Somewhere in the coming months, on some scheduled night, about two hundred deer will quietly cease to exist, and the morning visitors will notice nothing. If carbon dioxide ever acquires a colour, the world will discover where its real dirt has been accumulating all along. Until then, the question stands open: who will render the true account of the developed world's cleanliness?

