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2, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, Sri Lanka

E-mail: admin@ices.lk

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Three Contradictions of Liberalism

Uditha Devapriya*

* **Uditha Devapriya** is an independent researcher, writer and analyst

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“The middle is not a strategy. It's an empty room.”

Hunter Biden

I do not intend my essay to be long.¹ However, I do want to present some ideas. You may be familiar with most of them because they are always in the news, everywhere and all at once. My intervention rests on three key points: what is liberalism, where is liberalism today, and where must it be headed. These are not easy questions, and different people have different answers to them and different reasons for those answers. Since I am neither a political scientist, nor an economist, nor an activist, I shall avoid making recommendations on the trajectory liberals must take. I am, however, intrigued by liberalism's transformation over the last half century and what it has become at present.

Before I move on, I feel I must reflect on certain recent developments. For liberals in particular and political scientists and researchers in general, what is happening in the West, and by extension here in South Asia, seems to hold the promise of a different, alternative, though hardly unprecedented, vision of liberalism. I am referring, specifically, to the spate of victories that young, radical freshmen and freshwomen progressives within the Democratic Party are achieving in the US, of which the victory last year of Zohran Mamdani, as Mayor of New York, marks an apogee and the victory last week of Abdul Al-Sayed in the Democratic Primary in Michigan is a sequel. Political pundits are

¹ This is the version of a speech I delivered at “Chanaka's Legacy: A Critical Reflection”, organised by the Council for Liberal Democracy (CLD) and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) and held at the ICES Colombo on 31 July 2026.

framing these developments as the response of a vocal, articulate progressive political faction against a right-wing, authoritarian tendency in that part of the world. What interests me is not so much how Donald Trump is resisting these forces – and he is resisting them² – as how the mainstream and centrist faction of the Democratic Party has censured their policies and frequently cast (or miscast) such Democratic activists as radical left “loonies.”

Many, if not most of these candidates were endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America or the DSA. The view among centrist Democrats, who define themselves as liberal progressives, is that their policies go too far and are too out of step with the times. Months before Mamdani won the Mayoralty race, a leading pro-Democrat centrist journal, *Third Way*, published a memo that outlined a list of the DSA’s policies³. Among the more popular of these were defunding of the police, housing for all, universal healthcare, free democratic public colleges, and social ownership of industry. Many of these are policies which Mamdani campaigned for and those which he is, even if gradually, implementing as Mayor.

The *Third Way*’s framing of these policies is for me interesting because it points to a certain way of looking at liberalism. Stating that they are “deeply alarmed” by Mamdani’s policies, the editors observe that they “sound like they were cooked up in the offices of a Trump-aligned ad

² Chad de Guzman (2026), “Trump Labels Abdul El-Sayed a Hateful ‘Communist’”, Time Magazine (August 6, 2026), <https://time.com/article/2026/08/06/trump-abdul-el-sayed-hate-communist/> Accessed August 16, 2026

³ Third Way (2025), The Radical DSA and the New York City Mayor’s Race. Third Way. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep71164>

maker⁴.” Of course, I have yet to see where Donald Trump has promised universal rent control, publicly available water, energy, transit, food, and other necessities for all Americans. The DSA does talk about abolishing USAID and withdrawing from NATO, policies Mr Trump has promised as well, even if for ideologically different reasons. But all in all, the centrist critique is clear: the DSA’s agenda are as far to the left as the Republican Party’s is far to the right. In this scheme, they are complementary to each other. The *Third Way* concludes by urging voters to “think carefully” before voting for Mamdani, stating that a Mamdani victory would be a “devastating blow” in the fight against Trumpism⁵. Judging from recent surveys⁶, it’s safe to say that this characterisation of the New York Mayor has not aged well⁷, and that he is thriving rather well. Not that it has stopped centrist platforms from issuing fatwas on other candidates, including El-Sayed⁸.

“El-Sayed is a radical,” said Matt Bennett, a former staffer to President Bill Clinton and co-founder of the centrist think tank *Third Way*. Republicans agree⁹.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ YouGov, “Zohran Mamdani.” https://yougov.com/en-us/topics/public_figure/Zohran_Mamdani Accessed August 12, 2026

⁷ Third Way. (2025). Ten Reasons Why Mamdani Politics Won’t Win Outside of NYC. Third Way. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep73032>

⁸ Third Way, “Third Way Calls on Dr. Abdul El-Sayed To Say If He Aligns With Hasan Piker’s Anti-American and Antisemitic Views” (April 1, 2026), <https://www.thirdway.org/letter/third-way-calls-on-dr-abdul-el-sayed-to-say-if-he-aligns-with-hasan-pikers-anti-american-and-antisemitic-views> Accessed August 12, 2026

The latter passage reflects the point I am trying to make here: that in terms of policy, centrists who see and style themselves as progressives and liberals have become accommodative of, and agreeable to, the forces of the right.

The pushback against Trumpism, and by extension the right-wing authoritarianism of which Mr Trump is more symptom than cause, is taking place at a time when liberalism itself is coming under question and often under attack. At the core of these conflicts, I think, is the question of what constitutes liberalism and who is a liberal. The Democratic Socialists of America are by definition left-leaning. But it may surprise some of us that their ideas were popular among liberals two or three generations ago. At a time of widening wealth and income inequalities, such policies sound sensible and relevant¹⁰. Centrist pundits, however, tend to bemoan them. Their excuse is that at a time of polarisation, we liberals must take it easy, aim for moderation, and not upset the applecart. If the focus is on fighting right-wing excesses, we must avoid taking a leaf from left-wing playbooks. This is especially true of our economic programme: progressive taxation and wealth taxes are good, and it is reasonable to bemoan widening inequalities, but we should stop at these and not think about things like universal healthcare or rent control for the poor.

⁹ Michael Kruse, "Can a Progressive Win in a Purple State? Abdul El-Sayed Wants to Find Out." New York Times (July 27, 2026). <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/07/27/us/politics/el-sayed-michigan-senate.html> Accessed August 12, 2026

¹⁰ "Democratic Socialists of America: Our Program." <https://program.dsasusa.org/> Accessed August 12, 2026

I am not debating these ideas, nor do I want to pass judgments on them. But I find the centrist liberal argument against them somewhat ironic. The question facing us today cannot be any clearer. The rich are getting richer. The poor are getting poorer. Even though global poverty in absolute terms appears to have declined since the 1980s¹¹, we are seeing a high concentration of wealth that is unparalleled in recent history¹². Whether the solution is revolution from above, or below, or somewhere in-between, is neither here nor there. What is important for us liberals is that we adopt a programme that absorbs these developments. Instead of focusing on pragmatic policies or cautioning against polarisation, liberals need to take stock of what pragmatism has achieved or failed to achieve and why there has been polarisation in the first place. These questions are valid for all societies. They are valid for the US, for Europe, for India, and they are valid for Sri Lanka.

It is clichéd to infer here that liberalism today is at a turning point. Political ideologies are always at turning points. They are constantly changing and adapting. At times they can transform in unpredictable ways. Over the last 50 years, liberalism has undergone such

¹¹ World Bank. Poverty & Inequality Indicators. <https://pip.worldbank.org/poverty-calculator> Accessed August 12, 2026. For an alternative view, see “Has extreme poverty really plunged since the 1980s? New analysis suggests not”, The Conversation (August 18, 2025). <https://theconversation.com/has-extreme-poverty-really-plunged-since-the-1980s-new-analysis-suggests-not-261144> Accessed August 12, 2026

¹² “World’s top 1% own more wealth than 95 per cent of humanity”, Oxfam (September 23, 2024). [https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media/press-releases/worlds-top-1-own-more-wealth-than-95-per-cent-of-humanity/?pscid=ps_ggl_gr_Google+Grants+-+Press+Releases+\(DSA\)_Press+Releases+\(DSA\)&gclid=CjoKCQjwkOvTBhDgARIsAKUNyRsOXBW5g_h8nqMVObts1QdRjJMry_kf7l7cJCW7i1wOX6bw_v9OfIbIaApZUEALw_wcB](https://www.oxfam.org.uk/media/press-releases/worlds-top-1-own-more-wealth-than-95-per-cent-of-humanity/?pscid=ps_ggl_gr_Google+Grants+-+Press+Releases+(DSA)_Press+Releases+(DSA)&gclid=CjoKCQjwkOvTBhDgARIsAKUNyRsOXBW5g_h8nqMVObts1QdRjJMry_kf7l7cJCW7i1wOX6bw_v9OfIbIaApZUEALw_wcB) Accessed August 12, 2026

transformations. These have been underpinned by certain contradictions. To a large extent, the history of liberalism, whether in the US or Sri Lanka, has been characterised by these contradictions. While I am hardly a historian of ideas, I would like to note three of these contradictions for the purposes of this essay. Of them, two have been resolved, in full or in part, while a third remains yet unresolved.

The first contradiction goes back to the origins of liberalism. In its contemporary form, liberalism is understood, and often criticised, as Eurocentric. This is not entirely wrong. Liberalism as a political ideology emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, at the peak of the Enlightenment, through the writings of Locke, Smith, Hume, and other thinkers. In the 19th century, it was represented by the likes of John Stuart Mill. At its heart stood the principle of the social contract, which covered several fundamental and natural rights. I do not want to list them out, since you and I know what they are and how they have been enshrined by most constitutions today. Yet I do feel that we have failed to appreciate the dark underside of Locke's and Mill's ideas. As the likes of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Charles Mills have noted, liberalism became a vehicle for white privilege and European imperialism. From defending humanity as a universal ideal, it was deployed in the pursuit of Empire. In her study of Geoffrey Bawa, Shanti Jayewardene writes:

Eighteenth-century Enlightenment intellectual traditions manifest conflicted anti-colonial strands of thought... Their open intellectual positions disappeared when, from the 1830s, liberal intellectuals in Europe turned towards empire. They stopped challenging the tremendous violence of conquest and

the justice of empire, and commenced the project to sanitise violence. Today, scholars are seeking to explain the theoretical problem of how a liberalism that rests on a commitment to human dignity and equality supported empire¹³.

This idea is most forcefully enunciated by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract*. Mills begins his book by characterising philosophy, in general, as “the whitest of all humanities¹⁴.” He then charts the historical evolution of liberal ideas, which he traces to the transition from the Renaissance to natural philosophy. As one scholar has observed, the Renaissance began with Petrarch and ended with Rene Descartes¹⁵. Natural philosophy, on the other hand, has its antecedents in Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. It gained a second lease of life under Thomas Hobbes, was revived by John Locke, and reformulated by Jean Jacques-Rousseau. It is this trinity of social contractarians – Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau – which Mills explores in his book. Mills’s argument essentially inverts their moral philosophy. For him, it is the “Racial Contract”, which privileges white Europeans and Westerners to the exclusion of other groups, rather than the “Social Contract”, that constitutes the “actual genesis” of the liberal *weltanschauung* of Locke, Rousseau, and other thinkers¹⁶.

¹³ Shanti Jayewardene, Geoffrey Manning Bawa. *Decolonizing Architecture* (National Trust of Sri Lanka, 2017), p 216

¹⁴ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1997), p 2

¹⁵ Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Dover Publications Inc.: New York, 1988), p 10

¹⁶ Mills (1997), p 5

I will not delve into *The Racial Contract* in detail. Nevertheless, it pays to reflect on its premise. Central to John Locke's philosophy is the view that participation in the political process "civilises" man and emancipates him from a primeval "state of nature." This is a straightforward argument, and it needs little explanation. *The Racial Contract* contends that philosophers like John Stuart Mill revised that thesis. When the colonial project expanded and reached a peak of sorts in the late 19th century, Mill and his contemporaries jettisoned the more inclusive aspects of the Enlightenment in defence of Empire. To be sure, this was not a complicated intellectual leap to make. Locke's conception of "natural man", though outwardly universal, was itself very specific: white, male, and bourgeois. What Mill did was to reinforce these exclusivist aspects further¹⁷. In doing so, these thinkers espoused a "racial liberalism" which connected the liberal project to the imperial. (It must be noted that Mills pointedly noted that ideals such as representative government were suitable for "civilised" individuals – which, in the rhetoric of 19th century imperialism, excluded colonial subjects.) Such thinking emboldened white, privileged Europeans to espouse liberal ideals while also transgressing them vis-à-vis non-white groups. In that regard, *The Racial Contract* observes that "whether by law or custom", the polity, state, and judicial system of 19th century liberal ideology came to draw a line between whites and non-whites¹⁸.

But of course. It took more than 250 years after Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* for African Americans to gain the right to vote, even though, by the 20th century, liberals were talking of limited suffrage,

¹⁷ Ibid, pp 59-60

¹⁸ Ibid, p 14

including for women¹⁹. Such paradoxes are painful to reconcile oneself to. As Mills makes clear, the most humanist ideas could and often were used in the most racist political programmes.

Jennifer Pitts's *A Turn to Empire*, published eight years after *The Racial Contract* in 2005, clarifies these points even more. Pitts argues that while earlier thinkers could mount critiques of colonial rule in India, even if in a restricted, moderate form, John Stuart Mill oversaw a shift in tone in the relationship between liberalism and Empire²⁰. Aided by the growth of Evangelical missionaries, who preached against slavery, led the Abolitionist movement, yet became staunch defenders of colonial governance, he directed liberalism's transformation into a colonialist ideology coloured by "racial animosities²¹."

My claim, then, is... that liberal colonial reform itself, and liberal cosmopolitanism, had changed by the mid-nineteenth century. British superiority and the justice of British colonial rule were nearly taken for granted by the bulk of the population by the mid-nineteenth century: a sweeping critique such as [Edmund] Burke undertook was almost inconceivable in Mill's day²².

¹⁹ Or even earlier. See Alan S. Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Liberalism. The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

²⁰ Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire. The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2005), pp 160-162

²¹ *Ibid*, p 162

²² *Ibid*

There is much in these turns to Empire which we must unequivocally deplore. Yet it must be acknowledged that while radical thinkers in the Global South have done much to emphasise these aspects of liberalism, they have also managed, for the most, to resolve them. Post-colonial theorists like Fanon and Said, eloquent critics of Empire though they were, did not dismiss or cast aside the humanist ideals of liberalism. While acknowledging the history of violence underpinning liberalism, they reappropriated the liberal project and recast it. Said echoes this in the last paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism*.

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identifies on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about²³.

²³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage Books, New York, 1994), p 336

In reappropriating the liberal project – we can call this a liberalism for the Tropics – these scholars may well have echoed Raj Kapoor from the popular Hindi song “Mera Joota Hai Japani.”

My shoes are Japanese, these trousers are English;
The red cap on my head is Russian, but still my heart is Indian²⁴.

A young friend of mine put this in perspective for me the other day with what I felt to be an apt metaphor: “Just because cricket began here as an elite, white sport doesn’t mean a schoolkid from Kahawatte and Kurunegala cannot watch it, enjoy it, or play it.” My friend could have cited C. L. R. James’s memoir, *Beyond a Boundary*, which tells of how West Indians managed to beat their former colonial masters at their game. His own background, childhood, and education reflected this process of reappropriation. As a boy, my friend had attended Royal College, Colombo: an institution which, like cricket, used to be the preserve of an elite that subscribed to colonial values, but one which has transformed since independence to incorporate a more diverse crowd, including from villages and less privileged groups.

I am of course not romanticising or utopianising institutions, still less sports. But there has been a shift from the late 20th century onwards with regard to the way we look at our past, and that has provoked discussions around how institutions and ideas with chequered histories can be redeemed for both the present and future. The University of Edinburgh’s *Review of Race and History*, published last year, is a case

²⁴ “Mere Joota Hai Japani”, Filmy Quotes,
<https://www.filmyquotes.com/songs/1195> Accessed August 12, 2026

in point: it investigates “our historical ties to slavery and colonialism, the legacy of racist teachings and ideologies, and current challenges we face around race and inclusion” fairly comprehensively²⁵.

The relevance of all this for our discussion is self-evident: Eurocentric though its origins are, we should not belittle the universal appeal of the ideas of liberalism. Values like pluralism, tolerance, and dissent, which Chanaka Amaratunga and the Liberal Party fought for decades ago, in both the political and economic realm, and in constitutions and reform proposals, are universal. Even though politicians in powerful countries betray the imperialist bent of liberalism from time to time, especially when claiming that international law, which itself is a product of liberal thought, is applicable to “Africa and thugs like Vladimir Putin” and not “democracies” like the US and Israel²⁶ – despite their horrendous records – today we acknowledge liberal ideas as a goal worth aiming for and fighting for.

The second contradiction emerged after World War II, in the backdrop of the Cold War. During this period, in the West, liberalism acquired two faces. One was the domestic face. Western nations, including the United States, by and large implemented far-reaching and progressive reforms that attempted to reduce poverty and inequality. Civil rights,

²⁵ University of Edinburgh, Decolonised Transformations. Confronting the University of Edinburgh’s History and Legacies of Enslavement and Colonialism (Research and Engagement Working Group (REWG), Race Review, University of Edinburgh, June 2025), <https://www.ed.ac.uk/about/race-review/read-the-review> Accessed August 12, 2026

²⁶ Tom Dannenbaum and Eliav Liebllich, “In Context: Analyzing Secretary Rubio’s International Criminal Court Op-Ed”, Just Security (July 16, 2026), <https://www.justsecurity.org/147437/international-law-response-rubio-icc/> Accessed August 12, 2026

nationalised healthcare, and social security all cohered into a postwar consensus which, though liberal in outlook, was accepted by radicals and conservatives alike.

The other was the international face. This was more complex and problematic. At a certain point, Western governments began to view countries in the Global South which engaged in progressive reforms on their own as Marxist, authoritarian, if not totalitarian. When postcolonial countries embarked on land reforms which involved a loss of privilege for elite interests, their governments became *persona non grata* in the eyes of the capitalist West. It is an irony of history that liberalism, which had once been a creature and instrument of colonialism, now became a tool in the fight against communism in the postcolonial world. Over time, liberal principles like the right to dissent and freedom of expression were put in the service of the most hawkish foreign policies, which often entailed military intervention. Iran in 1953, Colombia in 1954, and Chile in 1973 are prime examples of this tendency: one that, as Iraq, Libya, and now Venezuela show, has not completely gone away.

The apogee of these trends, during the Cold War, was perhaps Jeanne Kirkpatrick's 1979 *Commentary* essay "Dictatorships & Double Standards." In it Kirkpatrick distinguishes between "authoritarian" regimes which are tolerable and leftwing governments which are "totalitarian" tyrannies that must be put down at all costs. Written at the twilight of the Carter presidency, this sentiment would define the foreign policy of the Reagan presidency, enabling the US to overlook human rights allegations in friendly states while intervening in hostile

countries, even if the latter had progressive governments in place. Kirkpatrick's essay offers a strange mixture of anti-communism and orientalism:

Traditional autocrats leave in place existing allocations of wealth, power, status, and other resources which in most traditional societies favour an affluent few and maintain masses in poverty. But they worship traditional gods and observe traditional taboos. They do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal relations. Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope, as children born to untouchables in India acquire the skills and attitudes necessary for survival in the miserable roles they are destined to fill. Such societies create no refugees... Precisely the opposite is true of revolutionary Communist regimes²⁷.

I would be hypocritical if I did not note how liberals themselves, even in the Global South, have adopted similarly problematic positions on these issues. In the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, for instance, there were progressives who sided with the Shah, despite his authoritarian legacy²⁸. Orlando Figes, that renowned historian of the

²⁷ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships & Double Standards", Commentary (November 1979), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/jeane-kirkpatrick/dictatorships-double-standards/> Accessed August 12, 2026

²⁸ Dayan Jayatilaka, "The Tragic Trajectory of Chanaka's Liberal Project", Groundviews (April 20, 2010), <https://groundviews.org/2010/04/20/the-tragic-trajectory-of-chanaka%e2%80%99s-liberal-project/> Accessed August 12, 2026

Russian Revolution, has written of how, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, anti-communists came out to romanticise the Tsar and brushed aside his violent legacy²⁹. This contradiction continues today. Just as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn supported the US war in Vietnam and Liu Xiaobo cheered the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, “progressive” commentators now refuse to look at what is happening in West Asia and call out the decimation of countries and communities. Ex-Soviet dissidents, lauded for their courage against authoritarianism, have allowed their opposition to all things socialist to colour their perceptions of progressive and centre-left governments, and figures³⁰. However, although this contradiction has not been fully resolved and may never be, progressive liberal movements have been able to transcend them and assert themselves. The US is a good case in point: a year and a half into the Trump presidency, we are seeing a shift in opinion, particularly within the Democratic Party, on issues like Gaza. This restores a balance that serves as a corrective to not just Trumpism but the sense of complacency which has seeped into the middle. Or as Hunter Biden put it after this year’s string of DSA-sponsored Democratic primary victories:

Endorsements from the current Democratic leadership now read like warnings. The establishment wing of the party is no longer a sword. It's a question mark... The middle is not a

²⁹ Orlando Figes (1998), “Burying the Bones”, *Granta* (Issue 64: Russia: The Wild East, 1998), <https://granta.com/burying-the-bones/> Accessed August 12, 2026

³⁰ Garry Kasparov, “Kasparov: In the USSR, I saw how Mamdani’s socialism can destroy a country”, *New York Post* (July 2, 2025), <https://nypost.com/2025/07/02/opinion/kasparov-in-the-ussr-i-saw-how-mamdani-socialism-can-destroy-a-country/> Accessed August 12, 2026

strategy. It's an empty room. Voters reached past the establishment to grab someone who actually believes something³¹.

The third contradiction is, at one level, an extension of the second, and it traces its beginnings to the late Cold War period, specifically from the 1970s. Until then, there was a somewhat lukewarm acceptance of policies like social welfare, industrialisation, and progressive taxation. Though denigrated as socialist today, these policies were incorporated quite enthusiastically into liberal programmes after World War II.

However, as we know, things began to change in the 1970s. At the beginning of that decade, we may all have been Keynesians, as Mr Nixon said. But by the end, as Mr Reagan claimed, government had become the problem. Interestingly, this turn from liberalism to neoliberalism took place, in many instances, under the watch of moderate and centre-left governments: the Callaghan ministry in the UK and the Carter presidency in the US. In Sri Lanka too, the lurch to the right by the United National Party in 1977 was predicted, and preceded, by the splintering of the United Front coalition and the exit of leftwing parties in 1975. Almost overnight, the ideas of welfare and intervention that had been taken as a *sine qua non* of the liberal consensus were giving way to a rollback of the State – at the expense of the most vulnerable communities. Unfortunately, after the conflagrations of the Cold War in 1991, “progressive” parties followed

³¹ Hunter Biden, “I’m not running for office. But if I were, these are some of the lessons I’d take away from what happened in NY yesterday.” X or Twitter (June 24, 2026), <https://x.com/HunterBiden/status/2069797401078939851> Accessed August 12, 2026

this pattern: the Democrats in the US, Labour in the UK, and much of the SLFP in Sri Lanka. Though politically liberal, at least on the surface, in economic terms these parties embraced the right. Against such a backdrop, ideas of welfare, community, and intervention took a backseat. We are seeing the result of this today: instead of halting right-wing forces, these shifts have fuelled them, so much so that the far right is gobbling up centrist and conservative parties with equal vigour. The most fitting metaphor here is not the genie out of the bottle, but Saturn eating his own son.

Of the three contradictions, this particular one, between liberalism's political and economic programme, has been the most insoluble. During the 1980s, the rhetoric of liberalism – rights, freedoms, liberties – were put in the service of an ideology that believed not in society but in unfettered individualism. Margaret Thatcher called this a shareholder democracy, and Lee Kuan Yew called it a “fair, not welfare society.” Glenda Jackson's obituary for Thatcher reveals how these ideas were promoted and where they ultimately have taken us.

We were told that everything I had been taught to regard as a vice – and I still regard them as vices – was, in fact, under Thatcherism, a virtue: greed, selfishness, no care for the weaker, sharp elbows, sharp knees³².

Beginning with Chile, unfettered capitalism, or the law of the free market, began to take hold of liberal ideas. Thatcher and Reagan are

³² Glenda Jackson, “Thatcher, a woman? Not on my terms”, openDemocracy (April 12, 2013), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/thatcher-woman-not-on-my-terms/> Accessed August 12, 2026

the classic, textbook embodiments of this transition, but other countries, including ours, have undergone it as well. Without getting into the theoretical dimensions of this shift, which I am not fully qualified to talk about, I will say that it has affected the course of liberalism for over half a century and will do so into the future. At one level, it resonates with the first of the contradictions I highlighted before. If back then intellectuals wondered how a liberalism born of imperialism and racialism could by definition be liberal, intellectuals are now wondering how the ideas of neoliberalism, or centrism vis-à-vis the Democratic Party, the Labour Party, and other liberal outfits since the 1990s, can cohere with liberalism's concern for the rights of all.

We must concede that the results of centrism have been ugly. Centrism has led not to free markets and open societies, but belligerent right-wing authoritarianism and military adventurism, not to mention indecent concentrations of wealth, à la Elon Musk and the other soon to be trillionaires. The lessons for liberals in countries like Sri Lanka could not be starker. We must at once imbibe a liberalism that is humane and just, one that does not stop at the notion of rights but their practice, particularly in economics. "It is very nice to drink milk at an unsegregated lunch counter," Martin Luther King observed, "but not when there's Strontium 90 in it." For this, we need a paradigm shift, one which incorporates ideas of welfare, community, and intervention within a progressive platform. That would constitute a bolder, more proactive, and more inclusive liberalism, of the sort which opposes not just political authoritarianism but also economic fundamentalism. The overarching belief of neoliberal thinkers in the 1980s was that where

free markets flourished, political freedom would follow. The world today offers a sobering contrast: tax cuts and privatisation have not pacified the *uber-rich* but given them *carte-blanche*. The result has been the rise of an increasingly belligerent billionaire class: from Ted Turner to Jeff Bezos to Elon Mask. This is the world which liberals confront. Compromise is not a solution.

To this end, one very crucial aspect of liberalism which we need to claim, or perhaps reclaim, is that it need not and should be about individuals only. The rights of individuals can and should apply to the rest of society. There is, of course, a fine line to be drawn between this idea of community and the ideals of collectivist, authoritarian states. But there is such a thing as market fundamentalism, which, as Chile under Pinochet among a hundred other examples show, has proved to be no better. It is only by rejecting both extremes can we embrace the middle. As of now, however, the middle has become synonymous with a near-complete capitulation to the right, and to the ideas of the right.

We are gathered here today to celebrate Chanaka Amaratunga's legacy. His project ultimately aimed at reforming institutions, inserting policies that otherwise would not have been implemented, and stimulating discussions and discourses among young citizens and old. Some disagreed with his vision, for reasons they doubtless thought sound. But at a time when the most nativist sentiments are on the rise, his project for a liberal Sri Lanka should not be abandoned. I do not idealise it, nor do I utopianise it. It certainly was not free of fault, and it suffered from several limitations. Yet at a time when Donald Trump is President of the US but Zohran Mamdani is Mayor of New York, we

need to address these contradictions. Above everything, we need to reconsider the core values of liberalism, its political and crucially its economic dimensions. We need to restore the idea of community and make it a part of the liberal project. This is the only way forward.

Three Contradictions of Liberalism

Uditha Devapriya

Tracing its origins to 17th and 18th century European thought, liberalism has had a long, complex, and troubling history. In this essay Uditha Devapriya explores this history from the perspective of three contradictions that have bedevilled liberalism from inception. Though avowedly humanist, secular, and inclusive, liberalism has also been defined by a particular worldview and shaped by the ideologies of its time. Today, as the world confronts an increasingly polarised economic climate, Devapriya suggests how we can rethink liberalism and make it more relevant to contemporary needs and challenges.



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