

This is your **last** free story this month. [Sign up and get an extra one for free.](#)

The New Leader of the Free World

Eat Your (Nonexistent) Heart Out, Donald Trump



umair haque

May 28 · 12 min read ★



“What do you think of her? I think she’s — “ asked Helen, the CEO.

“She’s our leader,” cut in Claudine, slowly, dreamily, her eyes wide.

“Well,” Ben, the grizzled London copper chuckled, “I can’t dispute that.”

“I really like her!” chirped the Kid Kieran.

“She,” concluded my kid sis, “is our Real President.” And for once, there was no millennial irony in her voice at all.

The doggies stopped running circles around the green, and looked up at us for a moment, grinning.

“Wait, what? Who is? Is this about Killing Eve?” I was late to this evening’s little group of friends from around the world meeting at the park, walking our little buddies, watching them play in the long sunny evenings.

Then it hit me. “Let me guess.” I took my best shot.

Claudine clapped in delight. Ben laughed, rolling his eyes. My kid sis beamed approvingly. Helen smiled.

Jacinda Ardern. The new leader of the free world. Isn’t she fast becoming something like that to many of those, I suppose, who are still sane and thoughtful people? And there’s something deliciously funny about it, precisely because there’s also more than a grain of truth in it.

Jacinda is like the anti-Donald. Young woman, old man. Fiery social democrat — disgusting ultra-conservative bordering on authoritarian-fascist. Thoughtful, intelligent, empathic, warm woman. Sociopath, narcissist, idiot man-child. The contrast *is* pretty funny when you think about it. Especially when you imagine the size of the tantrum...that a fool as insecure as Donald Trump would throw...at the very thought of... a whole world...admiring a young woman...actually building a better society...more than him.

She’s not just the anti-Donald, though. She’s the anti-Bolsonaro, the anti-Boris-Johnson, the anti-Nigel, the anti-Putin, anti-Modi. She’s the literal antithesis in every way of the strongman politics that have swept across the globe like a volcanic eruption of mass idiocy. I’ll come back to that.

One woman keeping the lights of civilization on...against the...collective strongmen of the world. It is funny, because it reveals how weak and stupid and vain they really are. Hence, people like my friends at the dog park look up to...the thirty-something prime minister of a tiny country at the edge of the world. And also to the country. Let me try to explain, in my own words, why they do. (And by the way, I don’t

say any of this out of ideology. I'm not really political, I don't care enough about it to be ideological. I'm just a pragmatist. The facts tell me this.)

Who do you see at the other end of the world? It's absurd to speak of Americans as free in any meaningful way. Nobody thoughtful can think America is a country that leads the free world anymore — and yes, I do think there is a “free world.” Is America even part of the free world anymore?

Americans don't have decent healthcare, retirement, education, incomes, governance. Trust and happiness have plummeted, and suicide and hopelessness are skyrocketing. Freedom became free-dumb in America. But in places like New Zealand, it evolved. It became the idea that we are freer when we all have expansive public goods, like healthcare, education, retirement, and so on. We are freest when we can treat everyone like a human being with dignity and worth — doesn't “everyone” include us, too? — not like disposable commodities, rivals for scarce resources, adversaries in a never-ending, brutal, daily contest for survival — one that ultimately makes people hated enemies — as in America, where people still don't even really know they've been dehumanized that way. Americans are regressing backwards in time at light-speed — fast becoming a nation of “low-wage service workers”, an economists' euphemism for “servants.”

When I say “new leader of the free world,” I don't just mean Jacinda Ardern. I mean New Zealand. As a society. New Zealand is a textbook example of what it means to be a thriving, functioning, modern society in the 21st century. It is a leader in that sense. It ranks seventh in the Social Progress Index — and is going to rise far higher after Coronavirus, easily cracking the top five or three. America, meanwhile, ranks a dismal...26th. And it's going to plummet. There's something special about New Zealand, happening in it, right about now. The world should pay attention.

As a glaring example of global leadership changing hands, New Zealand had among the world's best responses to Coronavirus. It didn't just flatten the curve. It “crunched” it, as epidemiologists say. Do you know how many people died of the virus in New Zealand? Just 21. *Twenty one*. How many does America have? A hundred thousand and counting. That's a stunning accomplishment. A remarkable one. Sure, New Zealand's a small country. But being a big country doesn't give you a license to just watch helplessly as thousands die. That's just a rationalization for negligence.

New Zealand has just a handful of deaths because it did the precise opposite of what America did. It locked down early, it tested and traced, and so forth. In other words — shocker — it listened to scientists. Jacinda took the warnings seriously, and acted fast. Did you know that Columbia University epidemiologists have estimated if America had done that, the death toll could easily have been cut *in half* — or more? That's fifty thousand needless deaths — at least. But many Americans — to the world's horror — still don't appear to care much. Why? Well, a lot of them take their cues from Trump. He first denied there was a pandemic, then he laughed, then he minimized it, then he did nothing, then he...encouraged people to drink bleach. Result? Historic catastrophe — which is still unfolding before our very eyes.

But it's not just its world-leading Coronavirus response. New Zealand is a pioneer in many respects, today — an institutional innovator. It's testing out what's called a "well-being budget." We invest in the things which improve lives most, first. It's becoming what I might call one of the world's first eudaimonic economies. That choice is going to pay off in spades. Who doesn't want a better life — apart from, well, Americans? Isn't that precisely what we should invest in — not more Facebooks and penthouses-in-the-sky for trillionaires? A lack of investment in anything that matters is exactly how America descended into a nation of new poor, one giant servant class attending to a tiny group of ultra-rich.

Hence, by now, Jacinda has won the admiration and respect of thoughtful and intelligent people the world over. My barometer is my little dog park — my tiny group of friends from around the world, which cuts through every kind of boundary there is. Helen the CEO, Ben the cop, Claudine the consultant. They don't have much in common. Yet when Claudine joked that Jacinda is "our leader" — and she wasn't really joking — everyone laughed, because it was secretly true. Those across the world who want better societies are starting to think of Ardern as something a little like their "real" leader — not the wackos and lunatics and bigots and idiots who run their governments. They look at their societies, and wonder: "Why can't we build something a little more than New Zealand? What the hell went wrong with us?"

Now, it's easy to idealize a politician. I'm trying to tell a story that goes deeper than that — about the maturity and evolution of a society. I often say "gentle and wise New Zealand." I mean those words. It takes a society of thoughtful and gentle and wise people to elect an Ardern, just as it takes a society of grinning American Idiots to be ruled by a Trump. There is something special about New Zealanders right about now, in an unstable world, buffeted by catastrophe.

You see, they did something remarkable. They bucked the rising tide of global right-wing fanaticism, led by strongmen, who are demagogues. Americans elected a Trump. Brits elected a Boris, and chose to Brexit. Indians have their Modi. Brazilians are now ruled by a cackling, preening Bolsonaro. New Zealanders did something that's still underestimated, beautiful, and funny: they gave the middle finger to the world's strongmen, collectively, and elected a...young woman from the left.

For an economist like me, it's hard to overstate how remarkable that is. I've been predicting the rise of strongman politics for about a decade ago, as economic stagnation sets in around the globe, which always triggers neo-fascist politics. That relationship is as predictable as the sunrise to me. New Zealand is one of just a handful of countries to be able to stand tall amid this fatal tide of demagoguery and strongman politics. It broke the dynamic that Britain, America, Brazil, and India, among others, fell prey to. How did it do that?

I think of New Zealand as the Canada of the East, sometimes, and Australia as it's America. I know that's an imperfect analogy. Still, let me employ it. Canada, unlike is a bilingual, bicultural society. In stark contrast to hyper-conservative America — a nation plunging backwards into medieval levels of exploitation — it's a social democracy. And Canadians are just...nice. Warm. Friendly. Everything that Americans — renowned for their hostility, aggression, selfishness, and cruelty, aren't. All that is true of New Zealand, too.

New Zealand and Canada are both societies at the edge of the world. They were the final outermost frontiers of waves of colonization. And for that reason, I think, they escaped much of the weight of terrible history in a place like America. A Promised Land like America is one which also must be purified. It's one in which the pure can enslave the impure. A Promised Land is a curse.

America and Australia developed in some of the same ways for just this reason. They weren't edges of the world — they were whole new continents to take. The Promise was too great. They are both marred by savage histories of violence and extermination. And both are still ruled by ultra-conservative politics, which reject climate change, equality, the world, the future.

It's true that New Zealand and Canada have painful histories, too. But they have gone a longer way towards making a difficult peace with that sordid history. It's easy for me to say that, of course, so they themselves must be the judge. But that is precisely

the point. When I say this to New Zealanders — or most Canadians — they will say: “but we haven’t done enough to make amends yet!” There is a hunger to be better people. To transcend yesterday’s strife. To write history anew. In America and Australia and Britain — is that hunger even there?

New Zealand and Canada are among the world’s gentlest, most progressive, most thoughtful nations. How did they get that way? My explanation is a combination of the above — societies at the edge of the world who had to do the difficult work of learning to coexist, something that Promised Lands never did. When you’re at the edge of the world, there’s nothing else left to exploit. You coexist — or you collapse. Still, looking backwards is one thing, and looking forward another.

You can see the power of cooperation, empathy, and warmth in the example of New Zealand very, very clearly right about now. The countries with the highest death tolls are America, Britain, and Brazil. What do they all have in common? Strongman politics. Violent, chest-beating men in charge of everything, marching armies of grinning idiots towards martyrdom. That’s not a coincidence — it’s a relationship. Strongmen are leading their nations to epic disaster — but many are still happily following them, partying all the way into the abyss.

Jacinda isn’t just the anti-Trump. She’s the anti-Trump because New Zealand is kind of the anti-America. Americans think that the opposite of America is a country like Iran or Saudi. Ironically, nothing could be further from the truth. America’s a lot like those countries — replete with death penalties, mass violence, racism, religious fanaticism, and so on. The true opposite of America is a place that largely rejects the values of aggression, hostility, enmity, and cruelty.

New Zealand’s stunningly successful response to Coronavirus was a product, I think, ultimately, of that: those deeper values. Ardern isn’t a dictator. She couldn’t have ordered people to do much of anything. It was people themselves, who, seeing the gravity of the threat, cooperated with one another. But to see the gravity of that threat requires a people who have matured emotionally far beyond, say, Americans: who possess a greater degree of empathy, warmth, courage, wisdom, purpose.

For New Zealanders themselves to have taken on Coronavirus says they are a people who have cultivated greater maturity in themselves. That sounds pretentious, overblown, but I mean it. Americans are still having pool parties...while the virus

hasn't even peaked yet. The story is about a whole country that the rest of us should learn from.

The future is going to require those values of cooperation, empathy, warmth, courage, caring. Societies with more of them are going to prosper — and those without them are going to fall. You can see that already in the example of Canada and New Zealand versus say America and Britain. This gap will only grow wider. Why?

The pandemic shut life down for a few months. Now imagine the effects of the catastrophes on our doorstep. Climate change, ecological collapse, mass extinction. The economic depressions and social chaos and political gridlock they yield are going to make today's look like a mere warm-up. When climate change strikes severely — about a decade from now — only societies with cooperative and caring values are going to survive it best. Those with the Darwinian values of cruelty, selfishness, and hostility aren't going to survive it at all. Who's going to rebuild cities torn apart by fires and floods? Who's going to care for those who flee? What will a "job" be then?

Societies like America have a grim, grim future precisely because their Darwinian values — let the weak perish, so the strong survive! — are going to produce more and more grotesque dystopias in an age of existential threats. By contrast, societies like New Zealand and Canada are far, far better prepared. They understand the mathematics of catastrophe: pay a little bit now, to stop the problem getting much worse, spinning out of control, later. Lock down now — prevent death from reaching American levels. Do the right thing — because the right thing is how we have more of a common good. There is more to go around for everyone when we mostly do the right thing, the good thing, the natural thing.

America, by contrast, has had its entire vision of good and bad, right and wrong, perverted. What's good? What's right? Greed, cruelty, aggression, enmity. You've got to be a killer. If you don't display those values from a very young age, you're written off as soft, weak, useless, a liability. Greed is good, selfishness is perfectly fair, and what's good is me being ruthless in my pursuit of self-gratification, and indifferent to everything else. Americans might not agree with that, but the truth is that's what they're rewarded for, from school through college to the day they find a job to the day they die, because they never retire. Good guys don't win in America. Trumps do.

These qualities that Jacinda displays so abundantly — compassion, warmth, wisdom, empathy, cooperation — what are they, really? **They're the precise opposite of**

patriarchy. Patrarchy: a system where men submit in order to the more violent one. Hierarchies of violence made of bands of brothers are formed this way. They carve up everything in society for their benefit — land, women, money. The brothers bond through and with violence.

Sound like America to you? It should. Think of the hazing ritual of the fraternity, like a gang beat-in. America's one of the countries in the world never to have had a female leader — and also has worse female political representation than Pakistan. America is patriarchy writ large. The bands of brothers control everything, and they do extreme violence to maintain their grip — whether needless war, or making sure a whole country goes without decent healthcare.

The result, though, is what happens in patriarchies: the most violent, stupid, brutal, idiot rises to the top. That's Donald Trump. Trump personifies the values of patriarchy. Everyone's a commodity. The point of life is personal gain, acquisition. You keep your underlings in line with intimidation and threats — and that includes a whole society. Any level of brutality and violence — a hundred thousand dead — isn't just acceptable, it's desirable. How else do you prove how tough and indifferent you are?

You can have a democracy, or you can have a patriarchy, but you can't have both. The results for Americans have been disastrous — mass death, economic ruin, social breakdown.

Jacinda's values are different. If I say they're "feminine," I'll get in trouble with the woke police. So let me just say that they're...non-patriarchal. They're human. Jacinda is that rarest of things. She is the last remaining humanist leader, perhaps, on planet earth. New Zealand is that rarest of nations, too. A wise and gentle place, seeking a better place in history. People mature and wise enough, perhaps, not to fall prey to the demagogue's seductions and the strongman's promises. And simply choose the best leader among them — no matter who she happens to be.

Let us all take a moment not just to idly admire all that. But to learn from it.

Umair

May 2020

Get the Medium app

