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FODI || THE IN-BETWEEN

EP 08 Naomi Klein & Waleed Aly

The In-Between theme music

Waleed Aly Our lack of control has become manifest. The inability of so many of us to cope with the idea that we are uncertain about what the future will hold. It's almost like we turned to the world, natural and otherwise and say, How dare you? How dare you take away my sense of control?

Naomi Klein All these stories that we tell ourselves about how we are able to be self-sufficient and are responsible for our own success, all of that just sort of fell apart overnight because our entanglements were exposed by this virus. And we had to think with every move that we made. Who touched what I'm touching? Who breathed this air before me? You know, who did the labour that makes my life possible? And it just completely exposed the entanglements that capitalism denies.

Danielle Harvey Welcome to The-In Between, an audio project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, presented by the Ethics Centre. I'm Festival Director, Danielle Harvey.

A state of flux has become normal life. Or perhaps it always was, we just see more clearly than before how things can change in an instant. How should we step into a future where our climate, and our political and social structures feel more uncertain? What must we learn from the collision of our many pasts? And how should we understand the complex forces playing out in this moment right now?

In our final conversation for this series, we are silent listeners between Naomi Klein and Waleed Aly, as they share thoughts on the loss of god, knowledge and control. Naomi Klein is an award-winning journalist, activist and international bestselling author. Her eight books have been translated in over 35 languages. In 2021, she joined the University of British Columbia as the UBC Professor of Climate Justice. Waleed Aly is one of Australia's leading commentators, and his work has been recognised with the Voltaire Award for Free Speech and the United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Award for Social Cohesion. Waleed is currently a lecturer in politics at Monash University, working in their Global Terrorism Research Centre.

This conversation was recorded in December 2021, and is moderated by festival Co-Curator and Director of the Ethics Centre, Simon Longstaff.

Theme music out

Simon Longstaff I just want to begin by acknowledging the Cammeraygal people of the Eora nation on who's country I am broadcasting from. I do so with an acknowledgement of my own kinship ties to the Anindilyakwa people on Groote Eylandt. I'd like to acknowledge them and the support that they've given throughout my time, but particularly to recognise that the land on which we are meeting for me, is the Cammeraygal's land. They've had a constant presence here. I think one of the issues I'll raise from Naomi's writings is about the role that indigenous people might have into the future, to give us a better way of understanding our

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place in the world.

Simon Longstaff Naomi, could you please let us know where you are joining us from today?

Naomi Klein So I'm speaking to you from a community called Whale Choir or Half Moon Bay, British Columbia, Canada. And speaking to you from my home, which is also where I work, part of the time when I'm not at University of British Columbia. And where I live, you have to take a ferry boat from Vancouver to get to it. And I feel very lucky to live in a place that just breaks my heart with its beauty every day.

Simon Longstaff Waleed, can you just for people who can't see you describe where you physically are as we're recording this?

Waleed Aly Well, I'm actually in a green room in channel 10's building in Melbourne, in South Yarra. This is the room that people often wait in before they go into the studio if they're about to be interviewed or something like that. I kind of feel like I'm hiding out. Like I'm meant to be elsewhere in the building, doing a voiceover or some other thing related to my actual job. But if I sound like I'm sort of hiding, (laughs) that's why psychologically I think I am!

Simon Longstaff Thank you, Waleed. Naomi Klein, you recently wrote, "millennia of accumulated human wisdom about how to safeguard and regenerate everything from forests to fish runs, were swept away in favour of a new idea that there was no limit to humanity's ability to control the natural world. Nor to how much wealth could be extracted from it without fear of consequence." And elsewhere, you wrote about having seen teenage girls treated like machines to make our machines and say mountains and forests turned to trash heaps to get at the oil, coal and metals beneath. One of the central ideas we're exploring in this series is that the period which we call the European Enlightenment was to a large extent based on a philosophical framework about control. The kind of things which I think you're pointing to here in terms of the exploitative nature of the world we've created. Is that what you had in mind when you were thinking about how we have swept away those more traditional worldviews?

Naomi Klein Yeah, I think that was a big part of it. And I do agree with that framing that a worldview based on domination and control is the worldview that is in many layers of intersecting crises at the moment. And it's intimately connected with the ecological crisis that we're in, and particularly the climate crisis. Because the very promise of fossil fuels, the very promise of coal, the very promise of oil was liberation from the natural world. In that you carried your own climate with you, that you sailed your ships without having to worry about having fine winds, that you could build your factories wherever you wanted without having to worry about where there was rushing water to power your water wheels. And for a few hundred years, that illusion of control was able to maintain itself. But you know, in geologic time, that's the blink of an eye. And now I think on your continent as well as mine, we find ourselves up against forces that kind of put humans in their place. They're so ferocious. And these are the forces that we unleashed with this fantasy of domination, with this fantasy that we could control the natural world without being in a reciprocal dialectical relationship of give and take of action reaction.

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Simon Longstaff And it seems to me that that notion of control is something that you have seen being applied not just to the natural world, but to other people as well.

Naomi Klein Well, I see them as the same system. We might think of it as an extractive worldview of just taking without caretaking. Or taking and disposing without thinking of what or who is being disposed of. And I think that that's capital's relationship to nature. And I think it's capital's relationship to labour and it's capital's relationship to humans from its very founding. Which is why a lot of theorists now refer to our economic model as not just capitalism, but racial capitalism. Not to make it a distinct form of capitalism, but to recognise that the first extractions, the first unpaid for inputs that built the modern world, were African bodies and indigenous land. These were violently extracted in order to build the excess wealth that fuelled the industrial revolution. And so, yeah, when we think about those factories in the treatment of contemporary labour, I think it fits within a logic of unfairness, of carelessness, of extraction and disposal.

Simon Longstaff Waleed, when you think about the period since the Enlightenment started and what it's produced, how do you respond to Naomi's characterisation of this aspect of it?

Waleed Aly This sort of idea of limitlessness of being able to tailor the world to suit one's own whims, that seems to me now something that has penetrated all the way down. At least in the western world, the way that we talk about realising the most perfect version of our lives always seems to me to be about breaking bonds. It's, 'I'm free, I'm liberated. I am living in a kind of utopia. If I, effectively, have no bonds restraining me.'

That is a kind of freedom that is attached to the billionaire, for example. They're not even bound any longer by the constraints of capital because they don't own factories that they need to tend to or railways or anything like that, especially as money has become more and more digitised and business has become more digital.

But similarly, in the realm of identity, I think it's the same thing. The way that pre-moderns would have spoken about identity, if they spoke about it at all, would be as something that was a given, to you, and that imposed obligations upon you. So you would then have to ask a question like, 'Okay, given I am X, what do I owe everybody else?' Now that moderns don't do that, we think about, 'if I am X, what does that allow me to require of you?'

But what's interesting to me is that the logic is the same, that in every case, we are trying to break bonds, escape being bound to one another or to something greater and seeking to assert a kind of control. And I think that's why the pandemic has been such an interesting thing to observe because the great myth that it has revealed to us is that we are in control, our lack of control has become manifest. And in a country like ours. And Simon, I mean, in Melbourne, which I think has won the title of most locked down city in the world during the pandemic. What's been fascinating is our inability in a very wealthy nation, even amongst people whose work has continued unabated, who even perhaps get to go into work so that they don't even have the misery of just constant lockdown, is the inability of so many of us to cope with the idea that we are uncertain about what the future will hold. It's almost like we turned to the natural world and said, 'How dare you? How dare you take away my sense of control?' We're affronted by this. I think it's one of the more curious or at least interesting

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responses to human life out of the pandemic.

Naomi Klein I think there's no doubt that there is a great deal of truth in that. And that we've seen this kind of liberation movement from anything like what we might think of as a shared reality, simply because it is inconvenient. And as somebody who has been really immersed in the literature on climate change and in the climate movement. It's very familiar, right? The denial of the climate crisis has now kind of extended into a denial of everything that is inconvenient to one's belief system or one's everyday habits. Right so, if you don't like the election results in the United States, it didn't happen. It was a fake election. If COVID is imposing restrictions on you that you don't like, COVID doesn't exist. Or it does, and it's a massive plot or whatever it is. But it's just really manufacturing a designer reality to fit your personal proclivities. But I think we've seen such a diversity of reactions to this moment of crisis, and it's included incredible acts of solidarity and mutual aid and compassion and just such extraordinary labour to keep each other safe. And I think the coexistence of this just extreme individualistic definition of freedom that Waleed's describing, coexisting with so much sacrifice is what becomes untenable. You know, these anti vaccine protests outside of hospitals interfering with people going to work to save people's lives? It's just an extreme culture clash.

So, I think our moment is holding a tremendous variety, and I just don't know how to hold on to a statement like, on the progressive side we are defining freedom in the same ways. I think in the movements that I see, whether they are for prison abolition or for climate justice, they're really rooted in deep understandings of entanglement and reciprocity and accountability. They're not perfect. We're all trying to organise in the rubble of this failing system and within an economy that pits us against each other, whether it's as individuals or whether it's as little NGOs fighting over foundation funding. But that said, it's really clear that there is an attempt to reach beyond that. I'm not saying it's always successful, but it's certainly there.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff As Waleed was speaking, I was wondering a little bit about whether this rage against the loss of control, the affront that he described of nature not bowing to our demands, might be also fuelling what you've written about in terms of this resurgence of an increasingly violent hard right? Is that feeding into that rise that you're seeing or do you think it's something else?

Naomi Klein I think we're in a moment of real political flux. There is this quite significant, it's sometimes called diagonalism, of this coming together of the sort of new age wellness worlds. And the far right who share this sort of hyper individualism. But at the same time, what I think is bringing people together as a sense of a shared mission, shared story, a co-creation of reality. So it isn't just this desire for individualism, because the appeal and the glue is a coming together. As is getting beyond that, breaking those bonds of individualism. I mean they're creating their own world. They're creating their own reality, right? Whether it's QAnon or, you know, some less all encompassing conspiracy about COVID. And I think it's a last gasp, yes. But I think it comes from this place of deep discomfort about what we're living through that COVID itself exposed a porousness instantaneously right? You know, we who as a culture have venerated our individual ability to create ourselves. And as Waleed

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said, to have this, our most perfect lives. And to claim that we are self-made and all these stories that we tell ourselves about how we are able to be self-sufficient and are responsible for our own success, and therefore we can blame other people for their quote unquote "failure." And all of that just sort of fell apart overnight because our entanglements were exposed by this virus and we had to think with every move that we made, 'Who touched what I'm touching? Who breathed this air before me?' Who did the labour that makes my life possible?' And it just completely exposed the entanglements that capitalism denies. And so I see that as the backdrop of this revolt against any admission of relationship. But as I said, I think we're also in a moment where a lot of people are realising that there is no liberation without relationship and that we've been living a fantasy for a very long time.

Waleed Aly I think the way that Naomi's explained that is completely correct. You know, the level of dependency. The sort of inextricability of our interrelationships becomes manifest in COVID. But I think what's happening there is, there had been now for the best part of a decade, probably actually for decades if you really wanted to trace it back. A sense that this narrative of individual self-sufficiency, was running aground somehow. And so you can look at the far right as just this retrograde movement that is really about bigotry, pure and simple. But you can also see something else in it, and that is that it's a deformed attempt to articulate a sense of us.

So a sense of community. But in a context where community has more or less been eroded to such an extent that we lack the cultural resources to articulate it in a meaningful or constructive or inspiring sort of way. I sort of first got my head around this when, in my academic career, when I was studying global terrorism and Islamist terrorism. And one of the key things that I think the Western world always missed with these forms of extreme politics is that they aren't merely hate movements. They are also attempts to create a love movement. It's just that in doing that, the nearest path they have to that is to articulate a sort of visceral hatred and contempt for those who are not within the in-group. But this sort of articulation of radical politics, is at least in some parts of the world, a response to the creation of the sort of hyper individualist unravelling that we've seen for a long time now. And the fact that it sometimes finds itself on the same side of politics as parties that push a kind of robust individualism, particularly on economics I don't think should, mask that fact. It shouldn't distract us from recognising that something serious is going on there.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff The ideals of the European Enlightenment at their very best were about a republic based on reason rather than superstition, about tearing down the old hierarchical structures that held people in oppression. It was about universal human rights to emerge that notion that every person has an intrinsic dignity. Even if the idea was imperfectly realised, at least that was something that it produced. And yet what we're talking about, something seems to have gone completely wrong, a kind of unravelling that we're talking about at the moment. But why do you think the better part of it went wrong?

Naomi Klein Well, I think it comes back to our earlier discussion. About these systems of domination or where it was anti-religious, but it was anti superstition, and it was elevating reason and science over religious dominance. But in a sense, it created a god out of science and it created a god out of the human at the top of the great chain of being right. And so it did

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challenge those intense hierarchies and those sort of fairy tales of control. The idea that we are now the gods. We humans, and the we in that story was not all humans by any means. I think that that's the story that's failing.

Simon Longstaff Waleed, do you look back at what might have been a sense of wonder at what they could have created and how it may have lost its way?

Waleed Aly A little bit, but I don't know. I'm a bit torn here because I don't want to do that thing that's so easy to do, which I inevitably will do, (Naomi chuckles) which is look back on history and say, 'What were you thinking?' Of course, it was going to turn out this way. But of course, it was going to turn out that way (laughter in voice) (Simon chuckles) for the reason I think that Naomi articulates. Right. I think the figure of God is actually really important in this, and it's interesting that Naomi reached for that metaphor here. We have been talking as though this kind of a linear progression that starts Enlightenment goes via capitalism, certain forms of capitalism, neo liberal forms, for example, environmental degradation and social unravelling, right? But there were other possibilities of the Enlightenment that were even realised. Communism, the paradigmatic opposite of capitalism, was one of them. If you want to talk about environmental degradation, see the Soviet Union. So it's not that capitalism was the only way to do this, but what they both had in common was they were trying to articulate a form of liberation. Of the creation of some kind of utopia or near enough to a utopia through means of reason and reference or resort only to material notions, really. It's very difficult within those sorts of worldviews to have any room for things that are more intangible than that. Things that live in the realm of life that we don't really have very good words for. So we resort to metaphors like spiritual or whatever. But nonetheless, things that provide a huge amount of meaning.

Take human rights as an example. If you ask people, 'Are human rights important?' Will everybody kind of nod sagely, right? But if you then start to interrogate at least with specific examples, 'Well you know what happens when human rights come into tension?' Or, 'What happens if you sacrifice this human right?' You could realise a great good for lots and lots of people. You know an example from that 9/11 era, of that debate is torture. What's interesting is the way in which human rights become dispensable, one reading of that would be to say, that just only underlines how important human rights are. But another reading of that, is it probably underscores that once we've severed those ideals or those commitments from a grander meta narrative that explains on what basis those things are asserted, then their footing becomes less sure. And I fear that's kind of what's happened as we've walked further down the path of the Enlightenment. And particularly as we've followed more and more liberal parts of the Enlightenment, is that we've become less and less comfortable with meta narratives because they're immediately open to challenge. And once you assert a meta narrative, particularly if you asserted in some kind of social way, a way that binds us. What you inevitably do is impinge on someone's freedom, someone's ability to self actualise. And so the meta narrative kind of in our societies, in liberal societies especially, must kind of wither away a bit at which point I think you run into a genuine crisis.

So to put this in concrete terms, I mean, I'm not a Christian, but if I were a Christian and you asked me to explain a basis for human rights, I would probably say something like, 'Well, human beings are created in the image of God that imbues them with a kind of sanctity. And so the violation of the rights of that is a violation of God.' That doesn't mean that religious

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societies can never violate human rights. That's self-evidently not true. But my point is there's a meta narrative there that provides a basis on which you can assert these things with quite a lot of force. That, I think, is just much harder to realise in the context of liberal societies, which is why I think the figure of God in relation to human beings and the interrelationship of human beings is one that we've just paid insufficient attention to.

Naomi Klein Well, I think if there is a meta narrative, it's the narrative of progress and sort of the perpetual improvement. And that is intimately tied to the frontier and the constant colonisation of new lands. And so those stories are hitting walls of various kinds. But I'm struck, Waleed, by your characterisation of it as a denial of the non-material right and something, anything, that you might characterise as spiritual. And I think that that's absolutely true to an extent. Although I mean, the colonial project in your country, certainly mine is completely entangled with the church and it waged war on a particular kind of spirituality that was connected to the Earth. And the reason why I pause over this idea that there was a lack of interest in the material is that I think that this project was profoundly uninterested in the material in the sense of the building blocks on which all of life depends. It had a bafflingly casual relationship to the natural world and what it means to deplete and what it means to pollute, and what it means to destroy the systems on which all life depends. It really is a war on the material and a war on the cosmology that venerated that kind of material and built a worldview that was based on understanding those entanglements and those dependencies and those interdependencies. And so I think we need a different kind of story that is less about a God and more about relationships with the seen and unseen that it's not about having a sort of godlike figure on top, whether that God is science or whether that God is a man in the sky.

Simon Longstaff And that's really the indigenous perspective that I think you were invoking when I began with that quotation from your work.

Naomi Klein Before we started recording. Simon you asked me what things were like in British Columbia and yeah, I live in unceded Coast Salish territory in so-called B.C. and the lands of the Shîsháhlh Nation. And these past months since May, I would say, have just been so wrenching. It really has been a period of unveiling and unearthing of all of these kind of buried secrets and realities. Which began in May with this revelation that at a residential school, a boarding school where indigenous children were taken, up until the 60s. And hundreds of graves had been discovered at the site of the school in Kamloops, B.C. And just as the province was metabolising this information that these schools were killing machines, were rape machines, were all about severing children from families. So that indigenous people could be severed from the land and these were schools where you were punished for speaking your language, for engaging in any kind of ceremony. The whole practice was made illegal, and was forbidden. And then, right after that, there have been these staccato extreme weather events, which Australians would be familiar with a heat dome that killed 600 people. Wildfires just ravaging. Now we've had these new names for weather events. A bomb cyclone right now, still part of the province is underwater from historic floods. And even as this is happening, our progressive government, we have a government that, you know, as the formerly Socialist Party, the NDP has been attacking indigenous land defenders who are trying to stop new oil pipelines and new gas pipelines. And so it just feels utterly surreal.

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And meanwhile, highways are sort of falling into the ocean and into the rivers, and this whole sort of project of civilisation is crumbling. So it just feels very connected. This war on a worldview that recognised our relationship with the natural world that literally made it forbidden, that that wrenched children away from their parents to impose a very different kind of worldview. And it is that system that is literally collapsing as we speak. So we have just a lot of work to do to connect these dots and come up with a story that we can believe in and share. And it won't be a new story. It will be a story rooted on the stories that are, the true stories of this land and they will be updated and they will reflect the changes. And the fact that we are a multiracial society and that we're going to see more and more migration in the face of the climate crisis. But they're stories of entanglement and their stories of rootedness, they have to be. Or we're not going to make it.

BRIDGE - MUSIC

Simon Longstaff Naomi, are you optimistic for the future? And can you paint a picture of what you think it might become if we pass through this period into something new? What might it look like?

Naomi Klein I'm sorry, but I can't describe myself as optimistic right now. I am somebody who has been characterised as optimistic during the past 20 years of, you know, talking about stuff in public. And I feel terrified at the moment. I feel that we caught a glimpse in the early months of the pandemic of what it might be to actually pause and reassess and think about what is really essential in our lives. And I think that we are still seeing those kinds of reverberations, even in just the kind of work that people are willing to do and not willing to do. And the way people have prioritised relationships over just grinding it on the job, that gives me optimism. But I don't know how many more signals we as a human, a family can get that we need to change course. And it needs to be a true mobilisation. You know, if we took this seriously Waleed, we would have the stories we need. We would have the sense of mission. We would have the sense of belonging that now people are getting from these, you know, conspiracy rabbit holes because we would be listening to what scientists are telling us. We would be listening to what the most impacted people are telling us. And we would be making extraordinary transformations that would eventually lead to a more caring society, a society where people feel cherished, not based on their just sort of individualism, but also because they're part of a society. Because of a richness that is in that kind of diversity, not to sound too cliched, but I don't think it is just about human rights. I think it is a little bit richer than that. And so I think we can glimpse it in these little moments. And I think we got closer to glimpsing it in the early days of the pandemic when we imagined a different way of living. When we slowed down. When we have more time to think about those of us who were privileged enough to be locked down. But somehow it's slipping through our fingers, and that really, really scares me.

Waleed Aly I'm glad you said you're not really optimistic because as you were talking, I was thinking, you don't sound that optimistic. (Laughter in voice) So I'm glad you clarified that bit. Because while it is true, I think the sound of a generation finding its voice on an issue like climate cannot but be inspiring. I remain pessimistic for a couple of reasons. One is it's unclear to me that their voice registers in a way that matters within democracies for really obvious structural reasons. Democracies are getting older and older and young people don't vote. They certainly don't turn elections. And so it's very hard to think of an example of an

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issue on which they've won. Really, that has been contentious, you know, especially where it involves redistribution of wealth or changes to economic structure. And they might win on the odd symbolic thing, but not really on anything that goes to the heart of political economy. But there's another structural reason I have a problem or a concern about, particularly in response to climate. And that is that I think we are dealing with structural impediments we cannot overcome, namely that we are trying to solve global problems through the apparatus of a nation state whose brief is to act in the national interest. And I think it is worth pausing to reflect on this before we just launched tirades of the politicians who are obviously failing on the issue of climate. But we should pause at least to recognise that we are asking them to do something quite deeply unnatural here, that goes against their reason for existence, really, which is to think and to respond in the national interest. We're asking them, in some cases, to sacrifice what at the very least looks like the national interest. That's not an easy thing to do. And the great contradiction we have is one of political structure there, not just one of moral failure of individuals.

And then the final reason I am pessimistic about that is for all the passion of climate advocates and activists and for all the truth they tell on most of what they're saying. What isn't happening, I think, significantly to the detriment of the environment is a sense of compassion, or of understanding of the predicament of those to whom climate action will or at the very least, looks like suffering. So in a place like Australia, the climate debate has effectively, in political terms, boiled down to people for whom climate action will cost nothing. Screaming at people for whom climate action will cost everything, their livelihoods and beyond that this sense of self because they live in mining towns, for example, that have been that way for generations and have monuments to the industry in their town square. And telling them that they are Neanderthals and retrograde because they won't get on board net zero. And apart from anything else, it doesn't work (chuckles) because what you end up getting is a debate that should be about how we avert an existential crisis. And we turn it into what becomes an identity based culture war.

If we are really talking about the rediscovery of community, it's not about me finding solidarity with likeminded people. That's easy. It has always been easy. It is about forging the bonds of community with people that we have beef with. It's about finding some kind of common touchstone, that allows me to proceed with the argument that I want to make, but at no point, to do it in a way that holds you in contempt.

Theme music in

Simon Longstaff Now Naomi, you must go and have a happy Hanukkah with your family, so we wish you all the best for that.

Naomi Klein Thank you. Thank you, Waleed. It's been really lovely being in conversation with you. Thank you so much, Simon, for these challenging questions.

Waleed Aly And Naomi, no thank you the honour has been all mine.

Theme music in



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Danielle Harvey: Thank you to Naomi Klein, Waleed Aly and Simon Longstaff. Accompanying this episode is a short response in sound, an entangled loop on this record of our moment In Between.

The In-Between is an audio project by the Festival of Dangerous Ideas. If you've enjoyed what you've heard, tell your friends, rate and review us online or subscribe.

The Festival of Dangerous Ideas will make its return to Sydney as a live event in 2022, on the 17th and 18th of September. Sign up for program announcements at festivalofdangerousideas.com. That's where you'll also find full bios for this project's speakers and artist contributors. Or follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

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Theme music out