

A lesson being failed in real time

by Chris Roche

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President Donald Trump with US cabinet members, April 2026

Photo Credit: [White House](#)

One of the more chilling pieces I have read in the last little while is Aarathi Krishnan's piece "[‘A whole civilization will die tonight’: on rhetoric as the primary weapon against democratic infrastructure](#)". In her post, she reflects on Donald Trump's [use of the phrase on 7 April 2026](#), and reminds us that this was the same day of the year the genocide began in Rwanda in 1994:

The juxtaposition did not feel like coincidence. It felt like a lesson being failed in real time, by people and institutions that have not yet developed the literacy to recognise what they are looking at.

Drawing on Philip Gourevitch's book *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, the Kenyan writer [Ngugi wa Thiong'o](#), and the Bengali polymath [Rabindranath Tagore](#), she reminds us of the power of words and the signals they give, and the dangers of us now seeing "civilisational annihilation and the quotidian scroll" sitting side by side as somehow normal.

The most dangerous political moment is not the atrocity itself. It is the period before it, when the language that makes the atrocity thinkable ...

Krishnan suggests that it is particularly in liberal democracies where the ability to distinguish the difference between political performance and leaders' intents is increasingly failing. Not least because "you cannot build a self-governing society on the assumption that your leaders are always performing". And that leaders from India, El Salvador, Italy, Argentina and the United States, as well as the fast-growing nationalist opposition parties in the UK and Australia, understand this vulnerability very well.

The cynicism that sustained rhetorical assault is designed to produce is not a defence against authoritarianism but its precondition, because when nothing means anything and all politics is performance, the loudest and most certain voice wins by default and accountability becomes structurally impossible.

Her provocation is that the declines in global freedom noted by [Freedom House](#),

and the fact that six of the ten new “autocratising” countries noted in the latest [V-Dem Democracy Report](#) are in Europe and North America, indicate that this pattern lies “not at the margins of the democratic world but inside it”. As the [UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres](#) has recently [pointed out](#), national political leaders in both democracies and authoritarian regimes are bringing “hate-fueled ideas and language into the mainstream, normalising them, coarsening the public discourse and weakening the social fabric”.

Now, whether or not you think Krishnan draws a long bow in directly linking Trump’s declamations with that of [Radio Mille Collines](#) — the Rwandan radio station that incited ethnic hatred and directed killings during the 1994 genocide — I would suggest that for those interested in international cooperation her piece merits reading. Not least because her conclusion perhaps points to some possible ways forward for a sector that is currently struggling to make sense of its role in a volatile and complex moment.

The capacity to read what is happening exists. It lives in Warsaw and Sarajevo and Kigali and Phnom Penh and Kabul and across the subcontinent and in the communities around us whose history required them to develop it as a condition of survival.

In particular, she points out that Pakistan’s ability to understand the threat beneath the words meant that it was looking to mediate an off-ramp from the Iran war whilst Western leaders were trying to read the Trumpian tea leaves. As [Megan Davis](#) has similarly indicated for those of us in Australia, the Indigenous experience of the [First Nations Dialogues](#) and the [Voice to Parliament proposal](#) provides an important body of knowledge on not only the early warning signals of rhetorical assault, but what democratic renewal might look like in the face of it. As [Yuen Yuen Ang](#) posits, being open to this [diagnosis “from the margins”](#) can also provide a better historical understanding of the unequal nature of international development and what she calls “the industrial-colonial paradigm” upon which it is based.

However, if the practical wisdom of those on the front line of hate speech and discrimination is to genuinely inform collective action, then this will require more genuine forms of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange, a more respectful exploration of different ways of knowing and being, and crucially revised notions of accountability. This might include starting to explore, as Yuen Yuen Ang has proposed, how what is described as a “polycrisis” by some might also be seen as a [“polytunity”](#) by others. By this Ang means that moments when multiple, interlocking crises converge also open up rare windows for systemic reinvention — opportunities to remake institutions, relationships and paradigms that would otherwise remain locked in place. And in particular to overturn the historical hierarchy of international

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development where “The West set standards, and the Rest followed“.

For the development sector, building the civic skills required to come to terms with the current reality, moving past the disorientation, **conferences and exhaustion**, and discerning what might be done in response is an urgent task. This is therefore not a call for further reflection or navel-gazing; rather, it is a recognition of the vital importance of listening to, learning from and building accountable relationships with those best placed to shape responses to the current moment.

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