

CHAPTER FIVE

Displaced/Displacing: Theorizing Tamil-Canadian Settler Colonialism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to draw a connection with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's increasing amount of effort towards addressing the concerns of the Tamil-Canadian community and its advocacy for justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka, and Tamil-Canadian MP Gary Anandasangaree's tenure as Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations, and its purported slowing of Reconciliation efforts, as part of a larger pattern of Asian settler colonialism in so-called Canada. This phenomenon, hence referred to as Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism, examines how Canada's policy of multiculturalism and its international reputation as a defender of human rights encourages complicity of Tamil-Canadian communities with the settler colonial state, in exchange for the safety that they are unable to find in their homeland. This chapter thus serves as a documentation of what diasporic settler colonialism can look like in a war-affected community and calls for Tamil-Canadian activists and scholars to develop forms of advocacy that serve to both fight for justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka while simultaneously disrupting diasporic complicity with the settler colonial state.

KEYWORDS: Asian Settler Colonialism, Reconciliation, Diaspora Communities, Tamil, Canada

On January 21st, 2024, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a speech in c.k.a. (Note 1) Laval, Quebec during a joint Thai Pongal and Tamil Heritage Month celebration, in which he stated that the Canadian government fully supports efforts to seek justice for human rights abuses against Tamils in Sri Lanka, reiterating that “Canada will continue to stand with the international community, including at the United Nations Human Rights Council, and call for accountability, call for justice, call for reconciliation,” (cpac, 2024, 4:43-4:55). Later in the year, during Indigenous Peoples Month in June, Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister (and prominent Tamil politician/Member of Parliament in Trudeau’s federal Liberal party) Gary Anandasangaree was quoted referring to Trudeau’s original 2015 platform on Reconciliation as too “ambitious” and that Reconciliation, instead, was to be a “multi-generational process” increasing concerns from Indigenous leaders that Reconciliation was not a priority for Trudeau’s government (SpearChief-Morris, 2024a, 2024b). I put these two incidents in conversation with one another to make three key observations that become more relevant as this chapter progresses: the urgency with which Trudeau discusses the concerns of Tamils in c.k.a. Canada and Sri Lanka, the lack of urgency with which Anandasangaree discusses Reconciliation, and the way in which a prominent Tamil MP and Cabinet member is centred in the dismissal of Indigenous concerns while the Prime Minister acknowledges and reaffirms Tamil concerns.

C.k.a. Canada is a vital location in the study of the Illankai (Note 2) Tamil diaspora, as it is home to the largest population of Tamils outside of South Asia, with a large portion of this population arriving as a result of the 1983-2009 war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the separatist group the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Prior to the mid-2010s, a large portion of studies of the diasporic Illankai Tamil-Canadian community has framed within the context of diasporic political activism regarding the war in Sri Lanka, especially in examining attitudes towards and activities in relation with the LTTE within the diaspora (Fair, 2005; Thiranagama, 2014) or calling to attention the criminalization of Tamils through associations with LTTE, designated a terrorist group by the government of Canada since 2006 (Bradimore & Bauder, 2011; Philipupillai, 2013; Sriskandarajah, 2014). Since the end of the war, however, there has been a marked shift in the way in which Tamil diasporic politics are presented to outside communities, with a turn away from engagement with the LTTE and Tamil separatism, and towards language that fit in with more Western human rights discourse, to somewhat favourable results. While there has been recent scholarly literature examining this change (Hyndman et al., 2020; Jayasundara-Smits, 2022), few have specifically engaged in considering the implications of such tactics within a settler colonial state, and how it could potentially link to the legitimization of settler colonial power. Thus, this chapter aims to begin the conversation through a theorizing of Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism under Justin Trudeau’s federal Liberal government, which I theorize has facilitated a form of settler colonialism that aims to link the safety and security of Tamils in c.k.a. Canada and the homeland with the continuation of the settler colonial state, encouraging Tamil complicity with settler colonial projects.

Before I continue, I find it necessary to locate myself within this research. Following in the footsteps of Phung (2019) “to lay claim to the ethical duties and responsibilities...migrants and refugees like my family and I have to Indigenous communities who have also experienced ongoing displacement and dispossession” (p. 19), it is pertinent that I disclose my motivations and goals with integrity and accountability before I begin this analysis. My family is from the island we call Illankai in the Tamil language but is known on maps as Sri Lanka. Originally

home to Indigenous peoples like the Vedda/Wanniya-Iaeto, migration from what is now called India led to the development of several Tamil and Sinhala kingdoms on the island. Following colonization by Portugal, the Netherlands, and Britain, the island became a singular independent country with a Sinhala majority.

During the colonial period, Britain's "divide-and-rule" policy had stoked ethnic and religious tensions on the island. This, along with an ensuing rise of a Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism on the island, resulted in political, social, and physical violence against ethnic and religious minorities including as Illankai Tamils like my family. This violence led to the rise of Tamil separatist organizations such as the LTTE, which, after the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms (also known as Black July), took up an armed struggle for a separate Tamil state on the island.

As a result of war between the GoSL and the LTTE, my parents fled the island and settled on Treaty 13 territory, c.k.a the city of Toronto, where I was born. I, identifying myself as a second-generation Tamil settler, continue to live and work on Treaty 13 and 14 territories, both of which were signed between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit, although these lands were the traditional territories of many nations (Roque & Mills, 2019). For much of my early life I was unaware of the treaties of the lands on which I lived, and failed to understand the way the structure of settler colonialism shaped my life in c.k.a. Canada. It was only in adulthood, when entering spaces focused on social justice, that I became aware of these structures and began exploring how to dismantle them. In presenting my genealogy, location, and history, I offer up the experiences that have shaped my work and name the communities, both those I do and do not belong to, that I feel an ethical responsibility to. I recognize that I am here as a citizen of a settler colonial state, my existence here has been shaped by that, and thus it is my ethical duty to figure out how to disrupt settler colonial systems in whatever capacity I can. I also recognize as someone from a war trauma affected community, and a second-generation refugee, I feel a responsibility to address and find redress for the violences experienced by my community. I am open and honest as I can be about why I am here doing this work, and I hope to do it with integrity.

This chapter will look at specific instances in which Trudeau acknowledges and/or affirms Tamil-Canadian concern around human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, often in partnership with Anandasangaree, and in turn consider the ways in which Anandasangaree's role as Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations has ignored and/or dismissed concerns around similar human rights abuses against Indigenous peoples by the settler colonial state. I directly link this to a recent shift in political strategy by Tamil-Canadian activists and politicians towards a human rights-based framework of advocacy that plays into the government of Canada's role as a benevolent protector of human rights on the world stage, and allowing it to dismiss its own colonial violence against Indigenous peoples. I argue that Tamil-Canadian activism should consider re-strategizing to ensure that advocacy for the Tamil community in Sri Lanka does not inadvertently help the Canadian government's settler colonial regime.

Tamil-Canadian Political History, in Brief

While the early Illankai Tamil-Canadian community consisted mainly of economic migrants and students, the events of Black July led to an exodus of Tamils towards c.k.a. Canada, a result of both then-novel refugee policies and the work of earlier Tamil migrants to advocate for them (Amarasingam, 2013, p. 139). The Canadian policy of multiculturalism, first adopted in 1971, was another important factor, allowing the state "to become a leader in showing

other western democracies how to effectively integrate immigrant and minority populations” (Thurairajah, 2017, p. 134). This was not to say that it was necessarily the multicultural oasis that it purported itself to be. For example, in the late 1970s, following an influx of Vietnamese refugees due to the Vietnam war, there was public outcry around the acceptance of refugees, with heavy racial overtones regarding an increase in the country’s non-white population (Adelman & Collins, 1979). Following the arrival of Tamil “boat people” in 1986, several MPs reported complaints by their constituents, arguing that the refugee system was too lax and accusing the refugees of being economic migrants “cheating the system” by claiming asylum (O’Donnell, 1986). These complaints came at the same time as praise for the Canadian government’s refugee policy, considered “one of the best in the world” by UN counsel Rudolf Cleaver, who also described Canada’s policy as “helpful and humanitarian” (Brehl, 1986). Others, such as religious leaders in Toronto at the time, also praised the policy (McNenly, 1986). Some commenters invoked previous refugee crises, such as the recent settlement of Vietnamese refugees or, in more devastating circumstances, the Canadian government’s rejection of a ship of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany during World War II, to argue for the acceptance of Tamil refugees (“A Passage to Canada,” 1986; “Still, A Sanctuary,” 1986). All these arguments directly focus on the humanitarian aspect of accepting refugees, seeing it as specifically in alignment with Canada’s role as a bastion of human rights and humanitarianism. Thus, Tamil settlement in c.k.a. Canada begins to wind itself with Canada’s purported commitment to human rights.

As the Tamil-Canadian community grew, and the war in Sri Lanka progressed, different organizations focused on the specific experiences of Illankai Tamils began to form. The early relationship between Tamil-Canadian advocacy organizations and the Canadian government circa the 1970s-1980s was described as amiable, with early organizations like the Society for the Aid of Ceylon Minorities (SACEM) and the Tamil Eelam Society of Canada (TESOC) working closely with the government on the settlement and care of Tamil refugees (Amarasingam, 2013, p. 167). At the same time, many of these organizations seemed to differ on political lines and backgrounds, especially on the topic of supporting the Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka. By the 1990s-2000s, “the diasporic political field became largely dominated by the LTTE, which saw in the migrant community a vital source of funding” (Guyot, 2021, p. 3). Thiranagama (2014) argues that the LTTE, through political maneuvering, was able to “[move] from being a political organization to being a cultural background” (p. 271) during this time, becoming an essential part of being Tamil when far from home and playing into the guilt some felt for being able to escape Sri Lanka while relatives stayed behind. Many in the Tamil-Canadian community saw the LTTE as freedom fighters, who were defending Tamil life, language, and culture on the island. However, when the LTTE becoming a designated terrorist organization by the government of Canada, coinciding with the post-9/11 “War on Terror” (Thurairajah, 2011, p. 133), support for the LTTE became seen as inherently violent by those outside the Tamil-Canadian community and, as later researchers showed, led to the idea that the Tamil-Canadian community was entirely untrustworthy due to the association with the LTTE.

In 2009, in response to increased military violence against Tamils towards the end of the war in Sri Lanka, the Tamil diaspora held protests worldwide calling on their governments to intervene in the war. This included several protests in c.k.a. Toronto, including a demonstration during which Tamils marched onto the Gardiner Expressway on Mother’s Day in May 2009. Since then, many scholars have analyzed the 2009 Tamil diaspora protests, including the way in

which Tamil-Canadians were perceived by larger Canadian society at that time. Many noted that while many of the complaints seemed to focus on feelings of frustration over the disruption, the complaints themselves often ended up in criticism of multiculturalism that questioned the loyalties of Tamil-Canadians, accused them of disrupting the lives of “ordinary” Canadians, and worked to other/racialize Tamil-Canadians as strange foreigners rather than fellow Canadians (George, 2011; Jeyapal, 2013; Thurairajah, 2017). For their part, Tamil-Canadians were aware of the way in which their advocacy was affecting their reputation in c.k.a. Canada, especially in terms of making “LTTE” synonymous with “Tamil”. In response, some chose to attempt to educate Canadian society on their stance, speaking publicly on their view of the LTTE as freedom fighters and arguing that their flags (Note 3) represented the proposed state of Tamil Eelam, rather than the LTTE itself (George, 2011, pp. 468–470; Thurairajah, 2011, p. 140). At the same time, earlier indicators of a concern about how LTTE-adjacent organizing was potentially impacting the efficacy of the protests became apparent. During one of the protests in 2009, for example, organizers handed out Canadian flags to protestors to “limit the damage” of the number of the LTTE flags (Amarasingam, 2013, p. 205). Occasionally, older protestors and organizers encouraged younger ones to disassociate with the LTTE, to mixed reactions (Amarasingam et al., 2023, p. 69; George, 2011, p. 471).

After the end of the war in May 2009, the LTTE was effectively dismantled. Regardless of whether individual members of the Tamil-Canadian community supported the LTTE, it was clear that the end of the war included intense violence and human rights violations against the Tamil civilian population that needed to be addressed. Not only was there extensive documentation of war crimes by the GoSL at the end stages of the war (International Crisis Group, 2020; UN’s Secretary-General’s Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka, 2011), there have been continued concerns around anti-Tamil violence and discrimination in Sri Lanka, including military occupation of traditional Tamil lands (Thiruvarangan, 2022) and a campaign of Sinhalization (Note 4). Sri Lanka also had many enforced disappearances stemming from before the war to present day, including many Tamils purportedly being the victims of enforced disappearance on the (often unproven) assumption that they were part of and/or complicit with the LTTE. Organizations like the Mothers of the Disappeared have faced government backlash in their efforts to determine the whereabouts of their family members (47 Roots, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020). It is also worth noting that while there are many members of the Sinhala majority who were also the victims of enforced disappearance, activism is often split along ethnic lines, with efforts to unite the Tamil and Sinhala Mothers of the Disappeared having thus far failed (De Alwis, 2009; Thushi, 2020).

Activism from the Tamil diaspora to advocate for the Tamils in the homeland, thus, had to continue, but could no longer take the form of support for the LTTE and LTTE-adjacent activities, pushing diaspora activists towards pressuring international actors to intervene in Sri Lanka (Guyot, 2021, p. 3). While the use of democratic, liberal norms to discuss and advocate for Illankai Tamils on the island is not necessarily new (Jayasundara-Smits, 2022, p. 87), its utilization by the Tamil-Canadians in recent years has been able to shift public perceptions of Tamils in c.k.a. Canada. Using democratic, human rights-focused language regarding the end of the war, the Tamil-Canadian community, and in particular, the activists within it, were able “*to challenge, even reverse, the securitisation of Tamils in the diaspora...casting them not as militant supporters of the LTTE and potential terrorists, but as Canadians concerned about war crimes, human rights atrocities, and a civilian massacre*” (Hyndman et al., 2020, p. 4, emphasis

original). This was achieved through a variety of strategies, but most pertinent was the election of Tamil-Canadian political representatives who were able to bring the concerns of the Illankai Tamil community to the mainstage, and more vitally, make it politically beneficial for Canadian politicians to align themselves with the Tamil-Canadian community. Guyot (2021) notes that as early as 2007, diasporic Tamil activists increasingly ran for elected office in their countries of settlement. It is here I choose to highlight again Gary Anandasangaree, current Member of Parliament representing Scarborough-Rouge Park, a largely Tamil riding, as well as the current Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations. While there are a few Tamil-Canadian politicians whose work I could analyze, I would argue that as a current member of the House of Commons with a significant working relationship with his party's leader and current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, as well as holding a position in the federal cabinet, Anandasangaree is arguably one of the most influential Tamil-Canadian politicians at present. Having already been a prominent member of the Tamil-Canadian community for decades prior to his election, Anandasangaree was known as an advocate for the Tamil community, helping spearhead or develop numerous political actions towards addressing the concerns of the Tamil-Canadian community in recent years, actions that would not have been even thinkable prior to 2009. Thus, I end this analysis of Tamil-Canadian political history with Anandasangaree, and begin a theorization of Tamil-Canadian Settler Colonialism.

Piecing Together Tamil-Canadian Settler Colonialism

My analyses of the relationship between modern Tamil-Canadian diasporic political activism and the settler colonial state requires an understanding of what I am calling Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism, which takes inspiration from scholars of Asian settler colonialism (ASC) to bring into focus interactions between Asian diasporic and Indigenous communities, and Asian settler complicity in the settler colonial project, while also noting the unique aspects of Tamil-Canadian settler relationship with the Canadian state. In the case of refugee and Indigenous communities in the settler colonial state “while both are essentially displaced natives, that is, displaced communities once connected to and having inhabited the territories they call home, the resettlement of one necessitates further displacement of the other” (Adese & Phung, 2021, p. 118). The Tamil-Canadian community, as largely members of the settler colonial state, should be understood as both displaced from Sri Lanka/Illankai and displacing Indigenous peoples from Turtle Island. For the Tamil-Canadian community to exist as it does now, or to even receive government support for its advocacy for Tamils in Illankai, requires a displacement of Indigenous peoples and a normalization of the settler colonial state. What is vital to understand in this conceptualization of Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism is that Tamil-Canadian political activism, especially diasporic activism that engages in dialogue between c.k.a. Canada and Sri Lanka, is heavily influenced by the Illankai Tamil experience of war. Following Ananda (2016), who, in analysis of diasporic Tamil post-war activism, found that, “public engagement with wartime suffering has come to define what it means to be a Tamil living outside Sri Lanka, even among those who generally stay away from the domains of ‘politics’ and the ‘political’” (p. 6), an analysis of Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism recognizes the way in which the GoSL-LTTE war has deeply impacted the way in which diasporic Illankai Tamils present, discuss, and experience their Tamilness, as well as the ways in which they replicate processes of settler colonialism in their places of settlement. Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism positions c.k.a. Canada as a safe haven for Tamils, and positions the Canadian settler colonial

government (and in the specific case of this chapter, the federal Liberal Trudeau government which took power in 2015) as a protector of that haven. This, put alongside the conceptualization of settler colonialism by Glen Sean Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene), wherein it is “a structure of domination that is partly predicated on the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples’ lands and the forms of political authority and jurisdiction that govern our relationships to these lands” (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016, p. 251), links the futurity of the settler colonial state with the safety of Tamil people and culture in c.k.a. Canada and our homelands, enmeshing Tamil-Canadian identity with the settler colonial process and the political authority of the Canadian government.

Before I continue, I want to make clear that I do not aim to denigrate or dismiss the strides that Tamil-Canadian activists and advocates have made to improve the lived realities of other Tamils and bring attention to the state violence in Sri Lanka. I do think this form of work is extremely important and necessary in our current political and global state. However, I am anxious about the instances wherein this work coincides or happens alongside the Canadian state’s maintenance and perpetuation of settler colonialism. Not just because of the way in which it harms Indigenous peoples and cultures, but also the way in which aligning oneself with the settler colonial state is no guarantee of safety. While Trudeau insists that c.k.a. Canada is a place of safety for Tamils, the pre-2010s era of Tamil-Canadian activism made it clear that “when the ‘Other’ became inconvenient, their status as equal members of Canadian society was questioned” (Thurairajah, 2017, p. 145). Tuck & Yang (2012) refers to the “selective collapsibility” of the “triad of settler-native-slave”, explaining “why certain minorities can at times become model and quasi-assimilable...yet, in times of crisis, revert to the status of foreign contagions” (p. 18). The criminalization of Tamils during the War on Terror as well as the 2009 Tamil protests showed that the benevolence of the Canadian state and its policy of multiculturalism exists only if it is not inconvenient, or even worse, threatening, to the white Canadian populace.

Within the Tamil-Canadian community, the policy of multiculturalism has played a vital role in how Tamil-Canadians link Tamil safety to the existence of the Canadian state. When looking at Tamil attitudes towards Canadian multiculturalism in c.k.a. Toronto, Amarasingam et al. (2016) found that many Tamils engaged in a form of “banal nationalism”, where some Tamils felt as if they had more flexibility to engage in their Tamil identity under Canadian multiculturalism than they did in Sri Lanka and therefore were more willing to see themselves as Tamil-Canadians and members of Canadian society. Thurairajah (2017) found that for second-generation Tamils, the policy of multiculturalism allowed them to “be Canadian” without having to give up their Tamil identity and culture (p. 140). However, participants in both studies were well-aware of the “limits” of multiculturalism (for example, eating traditional foods or praying at a Hindu temple was fine, but protesting as they did in 2009 was unacceptable), but understood it as a “trade-off” of being able to express pride in being Tamil and practice Tamil culture away from the homeland. This attitude towards the policy of multiculturalism highlights the conflict of being both a displaced and displacing people, echoing how “Canadian citizenship has been a mark of colonization for Indigenous peoples, while for refugees the possibility of eventual Canadian citizenship appears to promise safety and security” (Adese & Phung, 2021, p. 120). To further examine the dangers of such a dynamic, especially with a diasporic community with an influential representative in power, I turn to analysis of a similar dynamic in Hawai’i.

Early studies of ASC focused on interactions between Asian settlers and Native Hawaiians, concerned with “the complicity, and resistances, but mostly complicity, of Asian

settlers in the colonization of Hawai'i" (Isaki, 2016, p. 142). This sometimes took the form of "representational strategy through a non-White face as a means to further consolidate US settler and imperial hegemony" (Saranillio, 2013, p. 281), such as when Filipino-American and former governor of Hawai'i Benjamin Cayetano described the Kanaka 'Oiwī fight for self-determination as "futile". In another set of public interactions between Cayetano and Native Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask, it is noted that he "is able to protect his settler innocence by framing himself as Filipino, as someone who has faced racial discrimination" (Saranillio, 2019, p. 31). What is vital here is that Cayetano suggests an incompatibility between his ability to be elected as governor as a racialized man and accusations of him discriminating against Native Hawaiians on the islands. Through his role as governor, he protects the settler colonial project and suggests that the security of Asians in Hawai'i is only possible through an alignment towards US settler colonialism and away from Kanaka 'Oiwī self-determination. I argue that a similar dynamic is implicitly suggested by Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism, wherein c.k.a. Canada is a safe haven for displaced people such as the Tamils, and that is in turn incongruous with the idea that the same state actively displaces and marginalizes Indigenous populations. Taken further, it also suggests that in having an influential Tamil-Canadian representative in the House of Commons, both security for Tamil-Canadians and intervention for Tamils in Sri Lanka is possible, but only if there was an embrace of the settler colonial government. This is the primary danger of Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism – using Tamil-Canadian experiences of precarity and marginalization to dismiss or even work against the need for decolonization and Indigenous resurgence on Turtle Island. To see how that happens in practice, I now shift to Tamil-Canadian Settler Colonialism under the Trudeau Government.

Tamil-Canadian Settler Colonialism and the Trudeau Government

Justin Trudeau is the first Canadian Prime Minister with a Tamil-Canadian MP in his party (the first ever and only other Illankai Tamil-Canadian MP, Rathika Sitsabaisen, was a member of the New Democratic Party (NDP) from 2011-2015, which has yet to win a government). Soon after his election in late 2015, Trudeau began campaigning to curry favour with the Tamil-Canadian community, a notably marked shift from the previous Conservative Harper government. Early in his term, in May 2016, Trudeau made a public statement acknowledging the 7th year anniversary of the end of the war (Trudeau, 2016), one of the first times the Canadian government had acknowledged the concerns around human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, noting that "Tamil-Canadians are an integral part of our country and have overcome much adversity. I extend my deepest sympathy and support to Canadians of Tamil descent" (Trudeau, 2016). Soon after, the federal government became directly involved with the Sri Lankan government through a diplomatic mission by then Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion, with both Dion and commentators from Tamil and Sinhala organizations specifically calling for Sri Lanka to take inspiration from the policy of multiculturalism and embrace what Dion referred to as "peaceful pluralism" (Blanchfield, 2016). A few months later Anandasangaree put in a motion for the Canadian government to establish a Tamil Heritage Month (Tamil Heritage Month, 2016). By 2018, Trudeau was receiving criticism for "favouring" the interests of Tamil-Canadians over the broader Sri Lankan-Canadian community, with specific reference to Anandasangaree's comments about human rights abuses in Sri Lanka as an obstacle to better Canada-Sri Lanka relations (Lou, 2018). Still, Anandasangaree has become a key to Trudeau's relationship with the Tamil-Canadian community, often appearing by his side

at Tamil events (cpac, 2024; Scarborough Mirror, 2017). In 2023, the government of Canada commemorated Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day for the first time, one of the first governments to ever acknowledge a Tamil Genocide in Sri Lanka in May 2009. In a statement regarding the day, the Prime Minister proclaimed that “Canada has been a global leader in the adoption of other UNHRC resolutions calling for freedom of religion, belief, and pluralism in Sri Lanka – essential elements to secure peace and reconciliation in the years to come” (Trudeau, 2023). Most recently in July 2024, Trudeau commemorated the Black July pogroms, noting the nation’s intake of Tamil refugees earlier in the war, and stating “Canada now has one of the largest Tamil diasporas in the world, and we celebrate the contributions Tamil-Canadians make to our country every single day – and we will always protect them” (Trudeau, 2024).

MP Gary Anandasangaree took on the role of Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations in July 2023, replacing MP Marc Miller, who then became the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship. Miller was noted for being viewed somewhat positively by Indigenous leadership, having developed strong relationships with various Indigenous communities, which were then cut off by the cabinet shuffle. The loss of these existing ties prompted Douglas Sanderson (Opaskwayak Cree) to note that “time will tell how Gary Anandasangaree will do in building these relationships again from near-scratch, but the shuffle was a visceral demonstration of an old saying: to Indigenous people, a treaty is a marriage; to the Crown, it’s a divorce” (Sanderson, 2023). In the time since, Anandasangaree has not appeared to have been unable to recreate those strong relationships. In response to increasing liabilities due to Indigenous claims against the Crown, Anandasangaree stated that the government “has a grip on the claims and is righting historic wrongs through negotiation and reform,” despite criticism from several Indigenous commentators (Forester, 2023c). Anandasangaree also supported Bill C-53, which was highly controversial and received much criticism from Indigenous leaders suggesting that it was working to manage and/or appropriate Metis identity (Forester, 2023b). More recently, Anandasangaree has been criticized for his lack of funding for a landfill search to recover the bodies of Morgan Harris and Mercedes Myran, two Indigenous women from Long Plain First Nation who were victims of serial killer Jeremy Skibicki. The deaths of Harris and Myran are part of an ongoing crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQ+ people (MMIWG2S+). While he has received calls for action on continuing a landfill search since the beginning of his tenure as Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations (Needham, 2023), he has yet to take significant action, earning criticism, especially from the families of the victims like Harris’ daughter Cambria, who stated “It’s clear that reconciliation is dead, because we’re still sitting here 10 months later in these rooms with different politicians of all levels of government explaining my story over and over, begging them to find my mother” (The Canadian Press, 2023). The federal government, as well as the provincial government of Manitoba, eventually funded the landfill searches, leading to a recovery of both women’s remains (Chang, 2025). All of these incidents, along with other growing concerns around Trudeau government’s commitment to reconciliation, led to commentary in June 2024 by Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak (Pinaymootang First Nation) calling for renewed commitment to reconciliation as the federal government had allowed it to fall by wayside (SpearChief-Morris, 2024b), while Anandasangaree insisted “we have a very strong foundation and we will keep building on that foundation” (SpearChief-Morris, 2024a). When Anandasangaree attended the AFN general assembly in July 2024, he was accused of paying more attention to his phone than the speakers there by Regena Crowchild (serving as proxy for

Chief Roy Whitney, Tsuut'ina First Nation). Other Indigenous leaders at the event called out the lack of action on issues such as child welfare, treaty rights, and the environment. In response, Anandasangaree stated that “we have invested unprecedented amounts of money, but more importantly we have re-set the relationship in a way that cannot be turned back” (Slack, 2024). The difference in Indigenous leaders’ and advocates’ criticism of Reconciliation efforts and Crown-Indigenous relations, and Anandasangaree’s commentary about the federal government’s Reconciliation efforts since the beginning of his term, reveals the failures of Anandasangaree’s tenure as Crown-Indigenous Relations Minister. Indigenous advocates have felt ignored and disregarded by his, and by extension the entire federal government’s, lack of action on Indigenous issues, and none of Anandasangaree’s insurances that Reconciliation is moving forward slowly and surely have thus far been able to cover up the lack of progress.

I document these two relationships, Crown-Tamil relations under Trudeau and Crown-Indigenous relations under Anandasangaree, to draw connections between belief in the safety and security of Tamils under the protection of the government of Canada, and the use of a prominent Tamil politician to ignore and dismiss Indigenous concerns. When Trudeau speaks to the Tamil-Canadian community, he specifically speaks to the way in which Tamil-Canadians are part of the fabric of multiculturalism, important contributors to Canadian society, echoing the way in which the Liberal government often highlights the economic benefits of intaking refugees (Chin & Reid, 2023, p. 268). Promising to “always protect” the Tamil-Canadian community, commemorating days which the Tamil diaspora had memorialized for years without government support, and even suggesting that the adoption of a policy of multiculturalism could be the key to Tamil safety in Sri Lanka could serve to evoke deep loyalty from a community that has historically been criminalized and othered. Aligning with the previously mentioned way in which the policy of multiculturalism evokes a banal nationalism in the Tamil-Canadian community (Amarasingam et al., 2016), Trudeau’s Liberal government puts more focus on “connecting a sense of general patriotism to Canadian multiculturalism and diversity,” (Chin & Reid, 2023, p. 265). Critics of Canadian multiculturalism policy have called out the way in which it “operates to manage and contain cultural diversity...[and] turns ‘diversity’ into a commodity to be marketed and sold by both the state and corporations” (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012, p. 43-44), which is exemplified in Trudeau’s relationship with the Tamil-Canadian community. To Trudeau, multiculturalism does not only manage and contain cultural diversity, but also utilizes it for political gains with communities who rely on it to feel secure in “new country”. Trudeau’s government also puts a heavy emphasis on commemorative days and months to achieve this. Chin & Reid (2023) point to the Liberal government’s use of heritage months, “largely structured through government declaration rather than emerging from community traditions, and in that sense could be described as ‘top-down’ events” (p. 267). I argue Trudeau takes it further with the Tamil-Canadian community, also commemorating dates like Black July or Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day, specifically linking acknowledgement of violence against Tamils with his role as Prime Minister, offering a legitimization of Tamil pain. It is not necessarily about the acknowledgement of Tamil genocide as it is about the legitimacy of the Office of the Prime Minister, connecting Tamil-Canadian diasporic activism with Canada’s reputation as a bastion of human rights and prominent government within the Global North, through the acknowledgement of a genocide that many governments, including the GoSL, deny.

In contrast, Anandasangaree’s tenure as Crown-Indigenous relations minister has been coloured by the slowing of Reconciliation efforts and a lack of concern around Indigenous

issues. Anandasangaree insists on “strong foundations” of the Crown-Indigenous Relations portfolio, (SpearChief-Morris, 2024a) and calls for all levels of government to “come to the table” when it comes to addressing concerns such as the crisis of MMIWG2S+ (Forester, 2023a), but this seems more like damage control than stated fact when it is put in contrast with the ire and distrust of the Indigenous advocates and leaders he is addressing. Like Cayetano’s “non-White face” dismissing calls for Hawaiian sovereignty, Anandasangaree becomes a non-White face dismissing criticism of federal Reconciliation efforts, wherein he is able to frame himself as a beneficiary of Canadian multicultural policy while simultaneously upholding settler colonial notions. While Trudeau’s relationship with the Tamil-Canadian community is continuously cultivated, beginning early in his career with diplomatic relations (Blanchfield, 2016) and later sanctions against Sri Lanka and commemorations of anti-Tamil violence (Trudeau, 2024), Anandasangaree has been noted for his slowness to act (SpearChief-Morris, 2024a, 2024b) as well as his refusal to admit any failures of his policies (Forester, 2023b; Slack, 2024). Anandasangaree appears to have no issues calling Sri Lanka “a failed and bankrupt state” (Robertson, 2023), but he seems to refuse to acknowledge the failure when Indigenous Reconciliation efforts have gradually slowed over Trudeau’s tenure. To have Anandasangaree be such a prominent Tamil-Canadian voice, leading to the adoption of Tamil Heritage Month and Tamil Genocide Remembrance Day, of the Prime Minister attending Tamil events, of government sanctions against Sri Lankan officials, and yet at the same time be so disapproved of by Indigenous advocates and leaders, to the point that meetings between them lead to walkouts (Forester, 2023a) and moderator intervention (Slack, 2024), speaks to a uncomfortable trade-off. Yes, Trudeau acknowledges the pain of the Tamil-Canadian community, but Anandasangaree at the same time is slow to act on the pain of the Indigenous community. The state protects Tamil-Canadians, keeps them “safe,” but this safety predicates on the endangerment of Indigenous lives and complicity with the settler-colonial state. This, essentially, is Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism – through linking the freedom of Tamil identity and safety for Tamils in both c.k.a. Canada and homeland to the settler colonial state, and in offering the Tamil-Canadian community settler power through Tamil political representatives and membership into Canadian society, Tamil-Canadian political actors, and in indeed the larger Tamil-Canadian community, are encouraged to remain complicit the violence of settler colonialism. In other terms, it suggests that the only way to survive our displacement is to assist in the displacement of others, and the greatest danger is that we believe it.

Closing Thoughts

Justin Trudeau announced his plans to resign from office on January 6, 2025, and was eventually replaced as leader of the Liberal Party and Prime Minister of Canada by Mark Carney. Anandasangaree left the portfolio of Crown-Indigenous Relations in May of 2025, moving into the position of Minister of Public Safety. While the particular dynamics of the Tamil-Canadian settler colonialism I have theorized here have changed, it is still vital to document them as part of a larger fabric of ASC, and address similar dynamics as they develop in the future. Previous scholars have examined Indigenous-refugee relations (Adese & Phung, 2021; Nobe-Ghelani & Lumor, 2022; Yalamarty, 2020), or Asian complicity in settler colonialism (Day et al., 2019; Isaki, 2016; Saranillio, 2013), but few have looked specifically at a potential link between diasporic advocacy for homeland and complicity with the settler colonial nations they have settled in. This chapter is not just meant to add to a growing field of literature on the Tamil-Canadian community and Tamil diasporic politics, but to wrestle with the notion of a forcibly

displaced people having to displace others in their countries of settlement. The recent shift in Tamil-Canadian politics, as well as the election of prominent Tamil politicians, gives specific insight into the tactics used by Trudeau’s liberal government to encourage settler colonialism through “embracing” diasporic communities. The policy of multiculturalism is one of the most important tactics for ensuring that diasporic settler colonialism thrives in c.k.a. Canada, as diasporic communities are encouraged to support the settler colonial state in order to maintain “safety” of a multicultural society. Specific to the Tamil-Canadian community, which has experienced discrimination and criminalization in both c.k.a. Canada and the homeland, Trudeau’s recent embrace of the community under the lens of multiculturalism and humanitarianism plays on both the community’s past marginalization and their concern for their kin in the homeland. Yet, it is also through the career of Tamil-Canadian politicians like Anandasangaree that Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island are experiencing similar displacement, violence, and marginalization. The current relationship between the settler colonial state and the Tamil-Canadian community promotes c.k.a. Canada as a bastion for human rights, while hiding its human rights violations against Indigenous populations. It is vital that we do not let our community be used to justify similar forms of violence to the ones that we just fled. That being said, I want to clarify that this is not meant to discourage Tamil-Canadian advocacy for the homeland – rather, I hope to imagine new ways of engaging in advocacy that refuse, resist, or disrupt the notion of settler colonial countries as advocates for human rights and humanitarianism. This is a call for the development of a Tamil-Canadian diasporic advocacy that does not require the continuance of the settler colonial state of c.k.a. Canada, encouraging other scholars and activists can consider ways to advocate for our kin in our homelands while also supporting efforts for Indigenous resurgence and decolonization (Note 5).

Note 1: I am borrowing the term “c.k.a.”, short for “colonially known as” from Mitcholos Touchie (Nuu-chah-nulth) as cited by Morford (2019) with the intention of “acknowledging the Eurocentrism of many of the place names privileged in Western society” (p. 4). Consistent use of the term “c.k.a.”, which may be initially discomfoting, serves to as a consistent reminder that the land being discussed is occupied Indigenous land, as well as a refusal to normalize the settler colonial state of Canada.

Note 2: Most literature refers to this group as Sri Lankan Tamil or “SLT”. The group is also often referred to as “Eelam Tamil”, “Eelam” being the ancient Tamil word for the entire island and, in more modern usage, a proposed homeland for Tamils in the north and east of Sri Lanka. In my work, I use Illankai Tamil, after the modern Tamil word for the entire island, acknowledging a Tamil identity that is specific to the island (differentiating it from other Tamil communities such as the Indian Tamils of Tamil Nadu) and is understood through a Tamil lens.

Note 3: The flag in question depicts a roaring tiger crossed with two rifles on a red background. While originating from within the LTTE, it has come to also represent the proposed state of Tamil Eelam.

Note 4: Sinhalization can be defined as “a set of state-sponsored processes with the aim of elevating Sinhalese language, culture, historical narratives, and land ownership at the expense of Tamil language, culture, history, and land claims” of the North-East (People for Equality and Relief in Lanka, 2022, p. 5)

Note 5: d provides not just the space to work, but a context that influences thoughts and research. As such, I wish to acknowledge that this chapter was written mainly on land covered by Treaty 13 and 14 made between the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Crown, and the northern, eastern, and western regions of Illankai, as well as on the journeys in between these places.

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