



# EVENT REPORT:

From Nationalism to Civilisations: The Development  
of a Line of Thought

*Organised by the Ramjas Political Review on  
6 Feburary 2026*

## EVENT REPORT

### LECTURE: 'FROM NATIONALISM TO CIVILISATIONS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LINE OF THOUGHT'

*(Organised by the Ramjas Political Review on 6 February 2026)*

#### **Speaker**

Professor Liah Greenfeld, Professor Emeritus, Boston University

#### **Moderator**

Prem Ansh Sinha, Editor-in-Chief, Ramjas Political Review

1. The Ramjas Political Review hosted Prof Liah Greenfeld, University Professor and Professor of Sociology, Political Science, and Anthropology at Boston University, for an online speaker session titled 'From Nationalism to Civilisations: The Development of a Line of Thought' on 6 February 2026.
2. The lecture aimed at tracing the development of Prof Greenfeld's thought from a multifaceted understanding of nationalism through three stages: the nature of nationalism and its social and political implications, giving rise to the modern class structure and democracy; the economic implications of nationalism, giving rise to the modern economy of sustained growth, or capitalism; and the implications of nationalism for the private sphere of modern existential experience, giving rise to the modern emotional repertoire and the characteristic mental illness corresponding to it.
3. She explained how this study led her to the recognition of the importance of the supranational, or civilisational, level of the cultural process; the elaboration of the logical and empirical concept of civilisation; and a systematic approach to the comparative study of civilisations, with a focus on the three coexisting in the contemporary world: the Chinese (Sinic), the Indian (Indic), and the Monotheistic ('Western' and Islamic).

## MODERATOR'S COMMENTS

4. The moderator, Prem Ansh Sinha, Editor-in-Chief of the Ramjas Political Review, began the session with an introduction of Prof Greenfeld and expressed the shared interest of the audience in the topic of the day, before handing over the floor to Prof Greenfeld.

## THE TALK

5. Prof Liah Greenfeld began by expressing her objective to present the social sciences like the natural sciences, grounded in empiricism and logical reasoning, as opposed to an ideological character. She outlined the beginning of her personal interest in nationalism as the example of Hitler came up as a challenge to her idea of charisma as an expression of a pre-cultural phenomenon and subsequent questioning on her ideas by other academicians.
6. Attributing the rise of interest in nationalism in the West from the publication of the texts *Nations and Nationalism* by Ernest Geller (1983) and *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson (1983), she moved to describe her own understandings that started with the study of German nationalism; having grown up in Russia, she found similar conceptualisations in both nations.
7. She traced the historical beginning of the nation in reference to a political, sovereign community, with the term being derived from Latin. Employing a comparative, factual lens, she had turned to those European language dictionaries dependent on Latin to explore the concept of the nation further.
8. Highlighting inequalities across three social orders (the upper aristocratic order, the clergy, and the lower order of the commoners) till before the 16th century in England, Prof Greenfeld drew attention to a political and sovereign community dedicated to principles of egalitarianism, popular sovereignty, and secularism that came with the concept of a nation, where a destruction of the feudal aristocracy came with the emergence of a new dynasty needing a new aristocracy to support rule. The period was consequently marked by the upward social mobility of the lower order by their employment in important positions (those previously strictly occupied by the other two orders).
9. This egalitarianism brought a sense of dignity to all, along with the freedom of choice to be what they wanted to be. There were to be no fundamental differences between people. For

nearly two centuries, England was the only one to define itself as a nation, and dramatic changes in its societal working, with the common sentiment of being perceived as a nation, played a part in its rise as a global hegemon.

10. With the spread of nationalism in the 18th century, this 'dignified identity' gave rise to the growth of the idea of 'egalitarian consciousness', which developed differently in different places. Prof Greenfeld termed the nationalism of the Anglo world as individualistic and civic, where the nation was an association of free and equal individuals, and membership was choice-based. In contrast, other societies defined the nation as a collective individual, where membership may be a choice of will or a matter of blood (ethnicity). However, Prof Greenfeld reiterated a general repercussion of nationalism: A foundation on the principles of egalitarianism and popular sovereignty, which are also principles of modern democracy, while different nationalisms create different types of democracies.
11. She then shifted focus to economic aspects of nationalism, pointing out its contribution in the creation of class structures, replacing rigid stratifications with the fluidity of class. While there were claims of nationalism being based on the economy, Prof Greenfeld instead pointed out the discovery that a different type of economy came with nationalism about a hundred years later: growth based instead of subsistence based.
12. The collective competitiveness was named capitalism, which was characteristic of a constant orientation to profit. On addressing why such a society arose after the conceptualisation of nationalism, Prof Greenfeld pointed to dignity yet again, for besides individual dignity, citizens attempted to maintain the dignity of the nation globally, and most of their contributions to such an endeavour were through participation in economic activity. This economic competition in the international community led to a growth-orientated economy.
13. For 200 years, England 'competed' with no one, even when other countries started competing with it, it had reached so far ahead that no one could reach its level for 200 years more. However, Russia chose to compete in the military, while France decided to compete economically in things the English did not have as strong a hold on, for instance, fashion. Others, who could not compete, developed severe inferiority complexes, which Prof Greenfeld attributed to the resentment which developed towards leading Western nations.
14. Drawing on her research, she then highlighted the spread of mental illness which came with the spread of dignity and freedom. The freedom of choice and contradictory promises due to

structural inconsistencies led to psychological problems of insecurity and vagueness of identity for individuals, even proving fatal at times. This functional mental illness is rarer in South and East Asia than the monotheistic world.

15. In differentiating between the monotheistic (Western and Islamic) and the non-monotheistic (Chinese and Indian) world, she introduced the concept of the supranational, a self-sufficient, meta tradition, explaining that every civilisation has a 'mind' (concepts and values) of its own which explains the differences between them. She gave the example of India which has shown resilience in the face of centuries of rule by monotheistic civilisations, yet retained its own non-monotheistic character.

### QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

16. The floor was then opened for questions. On being asked about gender and class restrictions on voting despite claims of an egalitarian consciousness, Prof Greenfeld replied that the electoral phenomenon, and the restrictions with it, were relatively recent. She pointed to the fact that 16th century England did not deny the throne to women, having had women as supreme rulers, a testament to gendered equality.
17. On being asked about cultures that evolved not through resistance but selective adaptation, Prof Greenfeld differentiated between those and the three contemporary supranational civilisations, distinct because they had formulated their vision of reality in writing and thus defined them; a production of tropes owing to the constant repetition of written knowledge formed a particular brain. They also displayed a rare correspondence of written language and reality in certain cases.
18. On questions of inequality, and not egalitarianism, prevailing within nations, Prof Greenfeld pointed out that nationalism implies fundamental, and not absolute, egalitarianism, which allows natural differences to persist, calling it illogical to level out all human differences. She referred to the Tocqueville effect, wherein people from the most 'egalitarian' societies became more and more irritable to the smallest acts of inequality around them.
19. The final question asked what criteria helps in an empirical identification of a civilisation, as opposed to normative standards. To this, Prof Greenfeld stressed on traces of historical and geographical connections, along with the relevance of different cultures to one another, which play a part in the formation of these connections.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

20. The session ended with the moderator, Prem Ansh Sinha, thanking Prof Greenfeld for an extremely knowledgeable and interesting session, expressing hope to hear from her again. Prof Greenfeld also expressed her gratitude to the audience and the invitation.

*Ends.*