We are here today to open a museum that consigns nonhumanity to the place it belongs: to a museum, to history. The theme of this museum could not be more topical. It exposes the thin veneer of civilization and reveals our presumed humanity and enlightenment to be nothing more than an illusion.

I daresay we all condemn genocide and crimes against humanity. We are outspoken advocates of children’s rights around the world and we believe in the inalienability of basic human rights. Yet, the next minute we go and buy a hoodie made in a sweatshop with the use of child labour, a hoodie made by victims of oppression who live from hand to mouth, deprived of a childhood, denied a future. With each new hoodie we buy, we contribute to building the prison of their existence.

In a certain sense we have succeeded in our age-old quest to distinguish ourselves from animals: the animal kingdom is impervious to the double standards that we humans practice. Nature is immune to such hypocrisy.

We humans have a paradoxical tendency to see ourselves as superior to nature, as better and wiser. Yet our actions suggest the contrary: many things we do are far less logical and intelligent than most animal behaviour. No other species would systematically destroy its own habitat as we humans do, even though our very survival depends on the planet we are annihilating.

We annually consume more resources than the planet is capable of generating. Earth Overshoot Day arrives earlier and earlier every year. If the entire global population consumed resources as lavishly as the average Finn, we would need three planets to sustain our consumerist frenzy.

Dear friends,

I personally believe that the measure of our society is how well we treat the defenceless and the disadvantaged. We like to assume that we live in a community that looks after its neediest members: children, the elderly, the disabled, and those in need of help and support.

Yet in one respect we betray our true attitude. And that is how we treat animals. Although our dogs and other pets are legally defined as “property”, we love them and treat them as members of the family. They have names and personalities. Yet, we feel no flicker of compassion or protectiveness towards the animals that end up on our dinner plates, though they have the same capacity for pain and suffering as the pets we love.

We saw a good example a few days ago when Särkänniemi Amusement Park transferred its dolphins to a Greek zoo. The whole circus was one of Finland’s greatest PR debacles, yet it was ultimately more a tragedy than a farce.

It is encouraging to see that public opinion generated enough pressure for the amusement park to close its dolphinarium. The majority of Finns no longer condone the captivity of intelligent animals for the sole purpose of performing circus tricks for our amusement. And, yet, the public debate on the dolphins focused solely on how the amusement park mishandled its communications and whether conditions in the Greek zoo were inferior to the Särkänniemi dolphinarium.

Did the amusement park do the right thing by sending the dolphins to Greece? The greatest injustice already took place in the Gulf of Mexico in 1985, when the pod of dolphins was captured and sold into captivity in the first place. Alongside the original crime, the standard of facilities at the Greek zoo seems a moot point. No matter how well-equipped the zoo might be, the cruelty of the original crime will never be diminished. Would it actually have been more humane to put down these creatures that suffer in captivity rather than fight over the size of pool to which they were transferred? A dolphin belongs in the sea, not in a pool, no matter how large or fancy that pool might be.

The dolphins are a good example of our selective empathy. We similarly have a tendency to categorize people into two camps: “us” and “them” – one superior, the other inferior.

Our actions as a society mirror our values. Finland’s actions in the recent refugee crisis revealed something sad and frightening about us. If we treat the weak and needy as “them” rather than “us”, we do not truly care about their suffering.

Although a vast number of Finns expressed their support of the refugees by taking action and offering real help, our political leadership – elected by voters in free and fair elections – did the precise opposite. What is worse, the government weakened the status of refugee women and children, already the two most vulnerable groups within the refugee community. If a Finnish child goes missing on the way to school, the child and its family receive instant nationwide empathy – which is admirable. We share news on social media and express our hope that the child will be found unharmed as quickly as possible. But when a refugee child travels alone across Europe in search of asylum, Finnish society offers a cold shoulder. We are
“us”, and they are “them”. Our value as human beings is inalienable, yet the value of a refugee is contingent on the status of budget drafting, election polls, and the overall state of the economy.

As a member of parliament, I receive a large amount of feedback from the Finnish electorate. Recently, a lot of this feedback has concerned refugees. Many critics describe refugees as “animals”, or “apes”. As a politician who defends refugee rights, I am unfailingly addressed as a “stupid cow”. Through the rhetoric we use, we thus relegate certain groups to inferior status. We construct a fictive enemy and then we justify their unfair treatment on the grounds that they these people are “inferior”. Oftentimes this kind of hate speech is also sexist. All female politicians who defend refugees can count on being called “liberal whores”, and many of us receive threats of sexual violence. The rhetoric directed at males is totally different.

The age-old human compulsion to distance ourselves from animals is a paradox. By calling someone a cow, pig, cockroach or monkey, we are implying that this person is inferior, lesser in value, yet in doing so we reveal how our actions are far less logical and intelligent than the behaviour of many animal species. No other species would be foolish enough to systematically and consciously destroy its own habitat as we westerners do, literally compromising our survival by sawing off the branch we are sitting on.

Every year, we consume more resources than the planet is able to produce. Earth Overshoot Day arrives earlier and earlier each year. If the entire global population consumed as much resources as the average Finn, we would need three planets to sustain our consumerist lifestyle.

In conclusion,

The one thing I hope never to see in a museum is our Welfare State. The way I see it, the Welfare State is intrinsically bound up to the basic concept of humanity. The Welfare State is a social contract we have forged together in the belief that we are all equals and all members of society are entitled to the same rights, be they loved ones or complete strangers. Everyone should enjoy the same opportunities, no matter what their background happens to be.

Every child should have the right to an education, and every elderly citizen should be entitled to decent care. Our society is measured by the rights and privileges we share with complete strangers. Finland’s current political leaders – who were elected in a free ballot – have unleashed an unprecedented attack against the Welfare State. They seem to treat people like livestock in the meat industry, as raw material, as mere production expenses and cost overheads. The ageing population is referred to as a “pension time bomb”, parents who look after their children at home “undermine the competitiveness of the Finnish economy” and university researchers who contribute to our intangible welfare “have an adverse impact on employment”.

We are treated as mere pawns in an economic game, and our rights and opportunities are defined our value to the economy, much in the same way as livestock are treated as mere numbers. To quote the president’s spouse, Jenni Haukio, livestock has a price tag that determines how well they are looked after. Seeing people in purely economic terms is yet another way of building a wall between “us” and “them”.

Hopefully this museum will help us understand why it is time to consign nonhumanity to the dustbin of history. I sincerely hope that it will awaken our dulled senses and help us see the true nature of our actions. I would like to thank and congratulate Terike and Laura for this important project and I wish everyone here a thought-provoking experience.

Thank you.