

THE NEW ECONOMICS ZINE

PEOPLE. PLANET. POWER.

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CAN WORDS CHANGE THE WORLD?

HOW TO BUILD HOPE AND ACTION
THROUGH THE STORIES WE TELL

with articles by: Sho Walker-Konno,
Tamsyn Hyatt, Katharine Hayhoe,
Dora Meade, Steve Akehurst, Nadia
Hasan and many more



CAN WORDS CHANGE THE WORLD?



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EDITORS: SOFIE JENKINSON & MARGARET WELSH

ILLUSTRATION: ELISA MACELLARI (COVER & PG 6, 17 AND 22)

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10 SALAMANCA PLACE, LONDON SE1 7HB

WEB: NEWECONOMICS.ORG

EMAIL: INFO@NEWECONOMICS.ORG

TWITTER: @NEF



THE POWER OF WORDS

How do you change the world? Are words enough? Or are they just the icing on the cake?

From “I have a dream” to “Ask not what your country can do for you” to Greta Thunberg’s “you are failing us” to Tony Blair’s “Education, education, education”, we know that words can change the world and have an impact for years to come. These speeches were hoping to persuade, to inspire, to win – but most importantly they were telling a story that they wanted people to feel moved by and join in with.

Rebecca Solnit writes in *Hope in the Dark*: “*Changing the story isn’t enough in itself, but it has often been foundation to real changes... Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.*”

Stories can build and foster hope, pave the way for action, strengthen those actions and spread the word to build and create change. Stories are inextricably linked to power: it’s a lot easier to sell a narrative when your voice is the loudest in the room.

While observing a focus group recently we were struck by how much fear was dominating the opinions of the people around the table. Too often we let narratives that drive fear run amuck in our politics, our public debate and in our lives. Sometimes this comes in the form of stories about villains – the migrant in a small boat, the person in need of social security, the striking worker, or the young activist worried about the future of their planet. Other times it’s a story about scarcity or impossibility – how little money our government supposedly has to spend on the things we all need, or how a better world would be great, but just isn’t realistic. When you think about these stories, and how often you hear them, you begin to really see how powerful storytelling can be.

When fear is used as a motivator in a story – the big, dark, scary protagonist – people tend to become more insular. Fear brings out a base instinct in people. Their focus narrows down from their wider community to just themselves and their family’s survival. It individualises the issues rather than moving people towards thinking about how they can solve their problems in community with others. But for the scale of change that

the world needs, people must join together, think about our challenges collectively, and work with each other to fix them.

The climate crisis is a perfect example. Images of people’s homes burning in wildfires or devastating floods wiping out whole towns might generate a strong emotional reaction but at best they cause this narrowing of horizons down to the individual level. And at worst they risk paralysing people with fear, or making them feel like the problem is so huge it cannot be overcome. The scale of the challenge of the climate crisis cannot be solved by well-meaning individuals. It will only be solved by large-scale collective and global action – and there is very little chance we will get there by scaring people into action. Hope, on the other hand, is a very different motivator.

When you talk to basically anyone for five minutes, you realise how simple we all are. We are social beings who want to love, to be loved, to spend time with our loved ones, and to know they are safe and happy. This is not a fearful or hateful feeling, and it’s what connects us all.

Do progressives do enough to bring this out and go in hope-first, promoting and building joy? During the Brexit referendum, the remain campaign was branded “Project Fear”. It tried to use bald, rational facts to ‘win’ an argument that was being waged from the other side using emotions.

What if we could build a less fearful world where people would look out not in, where communities could flourish and the sprouts of positive change could grow? This starts with the stories we tell and the words we use – because even with the best ideas or the most ingenious solutions, you still need to tell their story and get people on board.

There is a lot to be aware of when thinking about how we communicate. Some of it is big, strategic stuff, like: who should we be speaking to? How do we reach them? Others are less visible. We need to be aware of unconscious things, like the cognitive networks of associated words, thoughts and feelings people tap into when they hear a word or phrase, the unintended consequences of using particular language, and what motivates people at a base level.

This issue of the New Economics Zine

looks at words, stories and how we use them, whether we're talking about the climate crisis, our working lives, taxes or abortion. Up and down the country, and across the world, groups of people are fighting to change things for the better. The right words are not enough by themselves – but when we look at campaigns which have been won, we can see that words really matter.

We hope this issue contains vital insight and advice for us all to think about how we tell stories and persuade others. Funmibi Ogunlesi explains why words matter, and how progressives can use framing tools to fight for a better future. But messaging is not a silver bullet – we can't expect to wave a magic narrative wand and expect everyone to agree with us. So Sho Walker-Konno offers a warning about the pitfalls of relying on messaging in a slapdash way.

When we encounter new stories, facts or ideas, none of us is a blank canvas. We all already have a mental framework which we hang these ideas off of. In our scene setter, Dora Meade looks how people in the UK think about what the economy is, how it works, and where these ideas come from. Paul Hebden looks back to the 2008 financial crisis to examine how our feelings about taxes are formed. The last decade of language about 'scroungers', poverty and benefits are the subject of a piece by Tamsyn Hyatt. And Nadia Hasan argues that it's not enough to express outrage about the treatment of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants trying to make the UK home – we need a new approach if we are to change people's minds.

Creative framing and messaging has already led to big victories. Karen Hand worked on the Irish Together For Yes abortion campaign, and shares how they won a victory for reproductive rights in Ireland – vital wisdom at a time when abortion access is under threat around the world. Jillian Marcellus gives us a view from the US, explaining how a new story called the Race Class Narrative has been used to win elections for the Democrats across the country.

We can use the knowledge from these past victories to plan for the future. Back on this side of the pond, Ayesha Balloch writes about how we can use the Race

Class Narrative here in the UK – and how it can be used to fight back against culture wars whipped up by certain politicians and pundits.

The words we use can give people a mental framework for concepts which can seem too vast and frightening to get your

“
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”

head around. The prime example is the climate crisis. With some bad-faith actors attributing the skyrocketing cost of living to our green policies, how can the climate movement make sure their messages don't get lost in the noise? Steve Akehurst looks at the latest research. Diyora Shadijanova explains how organisers and campaigners should fight back against our climate becoming a culture war topic in the UK. And we share an extract from Katherine Hayhoe's book on how to talk to the people in our lives about something as huge and scary as climate breakdown.

And finally, as we leave a year marked by Covid-19 and soaring prices, Charlie Hertzog-Young offers a beautiful comic reflecting on this year and offering a message of hope for 2023.

As we move into a new year where things will undoubtedly continue to shift, as old challenges remain and new challenges emerge, we hope the contents of this issue helps foster hope and spark ideas about how we can work with each other to bring about the change we all need. Let's use words and stories that lift us up, bring us together and help us to win an economy that works for people and the planet.

Sofie Jenkinson & Margaret Welsh, Editors

SEIZING THE ECONOMIC NARRATIVE

With a recession on the horizon and the cost of living skyrocketing, economic news is taking centre stage. But how do British people think the economy works? And where do they get these ideas from?

Dora Meade has the answers.





Last year, Martin Lewis the Money Saving Expert, used an appearance on the BBC's Sunday Morning to directly address the then chancellor Rishi Sunak: "As the Money Saving Expert who's been known for this - I am virtually out of tools to help people now. It's not something money management can fix. It's not something, for those on the lowest incomes, that telling them to cut their bills will work. We need political intervention."

If you delve into the question of who the UK public trust on the economy, two things become clear. One, there is a deep scepticism towards sources of economic information. The public believe media outlets peddle their own agenda and politicians are out for themselves This leads to an acknowledged ignorance of the economy: in general, people are happy to admit how little they understand. Mysterious market forces lead to economic good and bad times. This is a rare example of

humility in public attitudes. On most issues people tend to claim they know much more than they actually do. The second

“
...[the] lack of story presents an opportunity. A chance to craft a progressive narrative that says this moment must be a turning point
 ”

thing you will find out is that Martin Lewis is the exception to the rule. We trust him. We believe that he has our best interests at heart, that he is knowledgeable, that he 'gets it'.

And so in those few sentences, Lewis used his authority to send a clear message to the government - and gave a lesson in good communications at the same time. He spoke to the anxiety and pain households are feeling up and down the country, called out any attempt to blame their misery on poor money management, and laid responsibility to fix the problem squarely at the door of the government. It doesn't do everything a progressive economic narrative needs to do, but it's a good start.

Over the last year, we have seen prices rising faster than they have done in 40 years and inflation peaked over 10%. Up and down the country people are struggling to keep up with ever increasing costs. Amid stories of a crumbling NHS and industrial action across a wide number of sectors we

We are living through a painful economic moment that is likely to get a lot worse before it gets better. This presents a critical narrative opportunity for anyone wanting to shift thinking about the way the economy works. The public are being reminded every day that the old system is broken – when they are in the supermarket, at the petrol pump or sitting at their kitchen table staring at their paycheque. Now is our chance to say: enough



are braced for another year of economic pain and social turmoil. This is clearly a shocking and important economic moment: one that will impact living standards, the fabric of society and the economic narrative for years to come.

What is driving this economic moment is contested. Russia's invasion of Ukraine clearly has a role to play but polling shows that we also see Brexit, green levies and profiteering energy companies as drivers of high energy costs. What this plurality of thinking highlights is that no *one* story is currently narrating this economic moment. We are not able to say, with collective conviction, who or what is responsible for costs going up, wages not budging and the level of financial precarity being felt by most people

This lack of story presents an opportunity. A chance to craft a progressive narrative that says this moment must be a turning point. One that creates a foundation for a long-term shift in how we think about the economy, what outcomes it should strive for and who it should serve.

Without a clear story about what lies behind the economic pain so many of us are feeling, the public lacks the narrative 'scaffolding' to make sense of this moment from a progressive perspective and, most

importantly, believe things can be different.

Rewind to the financial crash of 2009. The explanation put forth by the Conservative Party, in opposition at the time, and much of the media was not one of a crisis caused by the 'global forces' or 'volatile international markets', which is frequently conceded to be the root cause of the cost of living crisis.

In fact, it was not a crisis at all: simply the inevitable conclusion to a decade of Labour rule.

In response to the 2009 budget, David Cameron said:

"The fundamental truth is that all Labour governments run out of money. The last Labour government gave us the winter of discontent; this Labour government has given us the decade of debt. The last Labour government left the dead unburied; this one leaves the debts unpaid. They sit there, running out of money, running out of moral authority and running out of time."

At the time, 'Labour spending mess' was repeated ad nauseum - by politicians, pundits and spokespeople from across the political spectrum - and it is still message-disciplined Tories to this day. And so, the story of what caused the financial crisis is cemented in people's minds: Labour

borrowed and spent too much money. The solution therefore was simple: austerity.

After 12 years of austerity, Britain is poorer and more anxious about what the future has in store. Today, the poorest are expected to shoulder the burden of rising energy prices and inflation, disproportionately feeling the impact of soaring costs. This is a collective moment of financial precarity. More In Common's tracker shows that the cost of living is overwhelmingly the top issue facing Britons today - having risen an incredible 39 percentage points in the last twelve months. Almost 60% of us reported cutting down on our energy usage in the face of rising bills. We are also deeply pessimistic about what is to come - just one in ten of us think it will end at some point this year whilst a significant minority (35%) say "I'm not sure it will ever end".

So how do progressives tell a compelling story that speaks to this collective moment? One which gives people an understanding of what led to this point and provides a vision for how things could be different. Some key lessons from the messaging work that the New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) has been involved in this year, gives us some of the answers to messaging this economic moment.

Reject the crisis frame

Describing something as a 'crisis' reinforces the idea it is a short-lived, temporary moment. Crisis language concedes that conditions are largely outside of the government - or anyone's - control. That is not the story we want to be reinforcing. But the truth is this is not a temporary blip in an otherwise healthy economy.

Resisting repeat crisis framing means choosing metaphors carefully. We are not experiencing a 'perfect storm' or a 'flood of need'. Weather metaphors depict economic conditions as natural, which reinforces the idea that they are out of human (and government) control. At best, we can try and predict what will happen next but we can't possibly change it.

Crisis language more generally, and weather metaphors in particular, build support for one-off emergency policy interventions that provide *temporary shelter from 'the storm'*. As progressives, we want to make the case for systemic policy solutions that fundamentally change the way our economic system works. The progressive win

that forced the government to implement a windfall tax on energy providers deserves to be loudly celebrated – but it should also be considered a narrative and policy stepping stone. One that takes us closer to a fundamental restructuring of the energy sector, rather than an end point in itself.

Talk about the ‘cost of living scandal’. This brings the often nefarious and bad decisions that led to this moment into sharp focus. It doesn’t do everything we need it to – we want to widen the lens and bring in wages as well as high costs – but it roundly rejects the passivity of the crisis frame.

A messaging testing project NEON ran alongside NEF, CLASS and other new economy organisations, put a series of messages on the economy to two thousand participants. We were interested in what language successfully builds the case for public spending and inoculated against austerity arguments in the face of government spending during the pandemic. We found a vehicle metaphor successful. This metaphor puts people, rather than unpredictable weather patterns, in the driving seat – quite literally. It draws on the idea that the economic system should primarily be about getting us where we want to go as a society, rather than treating the economy as separate to the wellbeing of people and communities.

This research found high levels of support for the value of interdependence, with positive responses to phrases like: “we all rely on each other.” The pandemic provided a shared reference point and real-life examples of neighbours and communities helping each other out, which we speculate is why this value is so effective.

Point the finger of blame

Whether it is the “economically illiterate climate lobby” or “obsessive NGOs and their acolytes”, as put by the Adam Smith Institute, the right-wing are clear about who or what is standing in the way of bringing down the cost of energy bills. They make a clear link between action on climate change and the price we are paying for gas and electric. In doing so they offer a clear villain (climate campaigners) who are intentionally standing in the way of making energy more affordable.

More often than not, progressives do not lift up heroes or villains. Instead, relying

on language that obscures who is to blame for wages staying the same year on year while rent, bills and food goes up. Families are depicted as facing ‘impossible choices’ between heating their homes or putting food on the table. This language repeats the individual responsibility framing of our opposition. Instead, we need to be clear that families are being forced into untenable positions by policy failures and bankrupt ideology.

Our research shows, the public overwhelmingly think those who work hardest for the economy (working people, unpaid carers and small businesses) benefit the least from the way the economy works at the moment – losing out to billionaires and big corporations. People recognise how deeply unfair the economic system is. The recent results of empirically tested messages in the new UK Race Class report by Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS) show that effective progressive messages need to name who is getting in the way of shared values being realised and show that unifying across race is how to make a better life for us all.

Provide a vision that goes beyond the basics

All too often, the vision we offer is one of people just scraping by, or no vision at all. Being in opposition to a government that is intent on starving public services of the funding they need, manufacturing culture wars to distract from their policy failures or enacting racist immigration policies has put us on the back foot. We end up fighting false claims and disproving figures at the expense of setting out a vision of the future.

We are stuck having the debate on someone else’s terms. We argue for policies that see things ‘restored’, ‘reinstated’ or ‘uplifted’. In the end, it sounds like we are calling for things to stay broadly the same but just a little bit better. Up and down the country, communities can see that the country is not working for normal people – and want to hear solutions that match the scale of the problem.

Over and over again, we see public attitudes are strongly in favour of government intervention in the economy and meaningful action to tackle climate change – but our policies are timid. The messaging work by NEON and NEF for the Living Income campaign – a campaign

to win a guaranteed minimum income for everyone in the UK – made clear that living through multiple crises in recent years has left many of us anxious about the future. As progressives we don’t want to stoke fear but we need to acknowledge and speak to it and show how our big ideas, like the Living Income, will meaningfully reshape the future. Our solutions can and must offer a visionary alternative to a system that is chronically failing and falling into crisis. It is when we position these policies as both common sense and critical in creating the society we want to live in that they have the potential to cut through.

We are living through a painful economic moment that is likely to get a lot worse before it gets better. This presents a critical narrative opportunity for anyone wanting to shift thinking about the way the economy works. The public are being reminded every day that the old system is broken – when they are in the supermarket, at the petrol pump or sitting at their kitchen table staring at their paycheque. Now is our chance to say: enough. And to build the belief that we can have an economic system designed to tackle inequality, protect the planet and properly fund the schools, hospitals and communities we all rely on.

As progressives, it is our job to make the most of this moment and seize the narrative.

Dora Meade is the head of messaging at NEON.

FURTHER READING

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WHAT IS FRAMING?



Progressives are used to presenting facts and compelling evidence, but finding that people don't come running to support us. Why aren't our messages cutting through? It's all to do with framing, writes Funmibi Ogunlesi

The Republican communications strategist Frank Luntz wrote: “communication is functional, the people are the true end, language is just a tool to reach and teach them”.

And yet as people who want to communicate progressive ideas, either at work or at home, we are often met with the frustration of saying the right things, presenting facts and compelling evidence and finding that people don't come running to support us.

Why aren't our messages cutting through?

If we want to communicate effectively to shift people's thinking, we need to start by not only thinking of what we are saying but most importantly how it's going to be received.

The truth is, human beings are complex, messy and contradictory. We are constantly processing the world around us through a filter of pre-existing beliefs and past experiences, deciding what does and doesn't fit into our understanding of the world. When progressives attempt to convey a message couched in facts and figures, the human brain will ask: 'Is this useful? Does this fit in with how I see the world?' For people who aren't already sold on our worldview, the facts won't fit and will simply be disregarded. This act of sorting information, making choices about what is important to keep and what isn't, is called framing. We are all doing it all the time.

Framing as a communications tool

Framing is also used to denote the choices we make around how to package what we want to say: what we emphasise, the metaphors we use, the values we want to ignite. It shapes the story we tell and, importantly, what we choose to leave out of that story.

Framing matters. Countless studies that look at how information is conveyed tell us that the way we 'frame' our communications can have a big impact on how people think – and act.

In 2008, Stanford University surveyed Californians to see how a simple linguistic change could motivate voter turnout. They asked half of the participants,

“How important is it to you to vote in the upcoming election?” and the other half “How important is it to you to be a voter in the upcoming election?” They found that participants whose message contained “to be a voter” expressed significantly greater interest in registering to vote than participants who were asked whether they “vote”. They then mapped this onto a second experiment to see if participants had followed through – if their intention “to be a voter” translated into actually casting a vote. It did. 96% of the people who were asked about being a voter went on to cast a ballot.

This experiment hypothesised correctly that saying “to be a voter” would evoke a sense of self that would compel people



The truth is, human beings are complex, messy and contradictory. We are constantly processing the world around us through a filter of pre-existing beliefs and past experiences, deciding what does and doesn't fit into our understanding of the world. When progressives attempt to convey a message couched in facts and figures, the human brain will ask: 'Is this useful?'



to vote. It spoke to people's identity, provoked them to tell a positive story about themselves: someone who plays an active role in society. On the other hand, asking people whether they intended "to vote" did not evoke a story. It brings to mind a one-off act and perhaps a stale political system you can choose to engage in once in a while.

In this example we not only see the profound impact of framing but the power in including language that inspires people to tell a story: a story that connects to how people feel about themselves and the people in their lives and their communities.

The big mistake we make when we are communicating is forgetting that people approach and avoid ideas based on their feelings – even if they are not aware of it..

Cognitive linguistics – in work such as *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman – tells us that emotions play a big role in how people process information. Political scientists in this field constantly stress the theory that people's political decisions are mainly based on how they feel about an issue. We gravitate towards things that are both cognitively coherent (they fit with our understanding of the world) and emotionally satisfying (they make us feel good).

This is why stories are so powerful. Nothing moves people more than a coherent, compelling and emotive story.

Stories in service of strategy

The human brain is constantly searching for stories to understand the world: whether it's a story that explains the meaning of life, or a story that makes sense of why a relationship ended.

Stories are an important tool in communications. When we weave all the things we want to say on an issue into a compelling story we can really seize our audience's attention and appeal to their emotions. And as progressives, we have the best stories: we have stories of people coming together to fight for change, people achieving big transformations in our communities and, most importantly, stories that paint a vision of the future that we all want to live in.

For example, tax. When we talk about tax we have a choice in how we frame it. We can lean into our opposition's framing and talk about tax as a burden and centre our messaging around how much we pay, or how much more we need to pay. Or we can frame tax around welfare and communities. We can tell a story about how everyone puts

in to create the community we live in, to build the schools, hospitals and roads we use every day.

But stories alone are not good enough, they are not the magical tool to change the world. Our stories need to be in service of our campaign strategies – the policies and actions that we want to be implemented.

Messaging experts from the US, ASO Communications and We Make The Future show how communications need to both centre the big narrative changes we want to see and include steps for practical implementation in organising. We Make The Future's messaging aim in this guide was to build support for a wealth tax that would fund vital public services. They start the guide with messaging which frames a wealth tax around the idea that wealthy corporations and billionaires should pay us what they owe. They then set out ways to use these messages to galvanise people towards a clear set of actions that push forward the campaign's policy asks. Communications needs to be grounded in real world campaigning and organising for it to be instrumental towards change.

Strategic communications

So, when we put all of these elements together, what does it actually look like in practice? The answer is: strategic communications. This is an approach to communications that aims to shift narratives around an issue with specific considerations about what and how your audience thinks, how to frame an issue in a way that connects to them, testing these ideas, and deploying them in campaigns.

In conversations around strategic communications we often hear this piece of wisdom: "we just have to meet people where they are at". This essentially means finding out what your intended audience already thinks and then shaping your messages to appeal to those beliefs. It means triangulating to best fit in with their pre-existing ideas and life experiences.

However, messaging expert Anat Shenker-Osorio stresses that more often than not where people are on economic and social issues is not where we want them to be. Finding out what people think is just the first step. Then we want to figure out the points that we can leverage to tell our own stories and change people's minds. In Shenker-Osorio's words: "We don't just want to take the temperature, we want to change it."

And so in order to change it what do we

do?

Shenker-Osorio's method is pretty straightforward: for any given issue there will be a percentage of people that always agree with what you say – they are your base. There will also always be a percentage of people who will always disagree – this is your opposition. Then the remaining vast majority will sit in between and this is the persuadable middle. So the first aim of the game is to craft and use messages that engage your base: these people will be the ambassadors for your message. You want them to like our message so that they repeat and amplify it. The second aim is to persuade the middle. This means that your message needs to be able to connect with the vast majority of people who sit in the middle. This could mean using language that they understand or including stories from their communities that they can relate to. And lastly, don't waste time trying to appeal to your opposition – an effective message should alienate them and present them as out of step with the majority.

Right now, we are facing multiple intersecting crises that are being felt by people up and down the country: skyrocketing energy bills, a dangerous reliance on fossil fuels, unaffordable housing, and more. This is our opportunity to get smart in how we communicate by focusing on the people we want to shift. That means telling stories that appeal to emotions, provide a coherent explanation of how we got to where we are, and build the belief that things can change.

Words are instrumental in our mission to change things – let's make sure we are choosing the right ones.

Fumibi Ogunlesi is interim head of messaging at NEON, focusing on narrative and messaging support for the social justice movement

FURTHER READING

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BEYOND OUTRAGE



*When the government thinks it can win votes by thinking up ever more cruel ways to treat people trying to make the UK home, how do we fight back? **Nadia Hasan** explains why expressing outrage isn't enough*

Anyone who cares about people being treated with humanity and respect will have been shaken by Priti Patel's plan to deport people seeking safety here in the UK to Rwanda. It's a dangerous and inhumane plan, and unfortunately it's just the latest in a long line of hostile government policies which target people trying to make Britain home.

We know this government could easily welcome people forced to flee – just look at the Homes for Ukraine scheme, or the way Poland has welcomed over 3 million Ukrainians since March. Yet instead of granting Black and brown people fleeing war the same safe routes here, this government chooses to use certain refugees as a political football every time it lands itself in hot water.

In fact, Priti Patel first briefed the Times about the Rwanda plans in June 2021, just as Boris Johnson's ratings were taking a nosedive at the beginning of Britain's third Covid wave. It's just one example of how this government points the finger at minorities, to deflect attention away from the harms *their* decisions cause. They want us to blame refugees, trans people and environmental activists for our hard times instead of the people in power: the ministers who handed crony contracts to their billionaire mates, slashed funding to our councils and partied while the rest of us locked down.

As migrants' rights campaigners, how have we responded? Well, we have

relentlessly expressed outrage at Priti Patel's cruel asylum plans. This is understandable. It has felt necessary to call out the downright horror of the Rwandan deportation scheme. We have wanted to expose the devastating effects of the home secretary's



...we have failed to paint a clear picture of the society we want to live in and the solutions that will help get us there. Without giving people a vision of the world we want to see, it's easy for our audiences to feel despondent and hopeless rather than motivated to take action.



new Nationality and Borders Act. However, we have often failed to paint a clear picture of the society we want to live in and the solutions that will help get us there. Without giving people a vision of the world we want to see, it's easy for our audiences to feel despondent and hopeless rather than motivated to take action.

There is, however, huge ground for us to build on going forward. The government's punitive new anti-refugee act may have passed, but the movement demanding justice and dignity for people who move is growing stronger every week. We have seen councillors and archbishops demanding greater welcome for people seeking asylum, we have seen crowds resisting immigration raids in Glasgow, Edinburgh and London and we have seen a huge coalition of people successfully halt the first Rwanda deportation flight.

As this movement grows, it's important for us to recognise that outrage won't be enough to oppose this government's inhuman policies. We need to communicate our values, and bring more people on board with our vision for a fairer, free-er and more solidaristic society. That means showing people that a different world is possible.

Compassion, care, fairness, equality – these are values most of us hold dear. When we begin our messages by appealing to these shared human values, rather than jumping to condemn a problem, this helps us build common ground between ourselves and our audience and helps shift people's opinions. It can be tempting



When we remind people of the kind of society we could be, celebrate the progress we've already made, and excite people with our visions for the future, we make our movement a team that people want to join



to jump to condemnation of a policy we know is egregious – like the Rwandan deportation plan – but evidence shows that beginning with condemnation often turns people away from our messages rather than bringing them in. Relatedly, if you're basing your argument on morality, criticising the financial cost of the policy weakens rather than strengthens your argument. Would asylum deportation schemes be any less immoral if they were cheap?

Often, we also denounce policies without identifying the politicians responsible, or the motivations they have. We talk passively about harmful immigration and asylum systems leading to 'marginalisation', for example. This makes change seem unwieldy, if not impossible, and lets the powerful off the hook: if marginalisation is something which simply 'happens', how are we supposed to stop it? If we're trying to encourage others to act, we should talk about *who* is peddling these policies and *why*.

We know that government ministers flouted lockdown rules and that they're backing billionaire bosses instead of struggling families. We know that this government is stoking fear and hatred of minorities to divert attention away from their own political failures. As well as identifying the devastating effects ministers' policies will have on people, we need to point out politicians' motivations. Calling out this government's divisive scapegoating tactics for what they are helps us mobilise people to act and unites people from across different backgrounds.

Finally, when we talk about people who move for work, love, safety or study (and often a combination of these), we should also try and use person-centred language as much as possible, rather than categorising people as 'asylum-seekers', 'migrants' or even 'refugees'. Most of us have moved at some point in our lives. People who have crossed borders are no different – like all of us, they have families and dreams, good days and bad days. When we're trying to elicit empathy and understanding, it makes sense to talk about what unites us, rather than reducing people down to a legal status or their negative experiences. In this vein, wherever possible, it's helpful to use language like 'people who've fled harm' rather than 'vulnerable asylum-seekers', and 'people who've made the UK home' rather than 'migrants'.

The anthropologist David Graeber once said "the world is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently". There's great truth in this statement. The decisions power-holders make are political choices, and they could just as easily make different, better choices. Wherever possible we should point out those alternative choices – like family reunion routes for people seeking safety, or short affordable pathways to citizenship.

Right now, instead of focusing on solutions, we tend to repeat and refute our opponents' arguments, with statements like 'seeking asylum is *not* a crime'. This only helps reinforce unhelpful and stigmatising

framing. To engender hope and action, it helps to talk about practical steps forward and the world we want to build towards. For most of us, that's a society where everyone is treated with respect and dignity, regardless of race, religion or gender; where our communities are welcoming, inclusive and caring, and where people feel safe and free.

When we remind people of the kind of society we could be, celebrate the progress we've already made, and excite people with our visions for the future, we make our movement a team that people want to join.

Nadia Hasan is communications officer at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants

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MESSAGING THAT WORKS FOR THE MESSENGERS



*In the NGO world, framing, messaging and narrative work are all at the peak of their hype cycle. **Sho Walker-Konno** sets out the pitfalls of its popularity – and how it can be used to make a real difference*

If you are reading this article, you have probably also read Guardian articles about how progressives need to reframe our messages or watched Instagram influencers casually refer to the narratives that shape society. You may be equal parts inspired, curious, and baffled.

One advantage of the Zoom workshops we've all been in recently is that people seem freer to give blunt feedback. In a recent remote session about strategic communications and messaging for activists from central and eastern Europe, I saw this 'virtual post-it note' pop up: "I'm still not sure how applicable some of this advice will be to my situation".

This scepticism about the applicability of narrative and messaging work is shared by plenty of progressives in the UK too. Sure,

some of it is unfounded distrust of 'new' disciplines challenging our habits, but a lot of it is valid!

Whether we are talking about 'narrative change', 'strategic communications', or more specifically 'messaging', the excitement, word-count, and webinar-time being expended on these approaches is not being matched by the uptake among those who might actually benefit from it in their everyday work. Messaging matters – most activists intuitively understand this and are desperate for more help to better understand and influence the narratives that make or break our shared struggles. So how could messaging better serve the messengers?

Why are we doing this?

Activists often have to be their own

policy, advocacy, and communications teams combined, but when NGOs and foundations work on messaging they cannot help falling into those silos. I have both witnessed and committed this mistake, assuming that campaigners needed my help to write and speak more persuasively but not appreciating the campaigning fundamentals that are too often missing from communications work. What should come first is an understanding of power, and a theory of change for what and who these messages will target, how they will actually get used and why that has an impact. You've reframed a sentence to get a 10% better approval rate from survey respondents who represent 10% of the population, but so what?

This lack of strategic clarity about why we

need different messaging in the first place seems to be fuelling the confusion around genuine and necessary communications debates in the UK. Are actors like Extinction Rebellion an asset because we seek to raise the salience of climate change or a liability because we want to bring everyone with us? Are we trying to find the most effective way to win the culture wars, or are we seeking to reduce polarisation as an end in itself? How much do we care about resonating with where 'the public' currently are on rights or asylum seekers, if where they are is unacceptable? I would love more authors of messaging research to state explicitly their assumptions and starting points on these questions, so that before they tell us what to say, we can judge whether we agree on why we are saying it.

There's no messaging without messengers

Narrative change work has been a funder darling for a few years now. But it does not pay enough attention to the discipline it overtook as a fashionable buzzword: organising. So much messaging work involves testing a paragraph of text coming from an anonymous voice, ignoring the pivotal effect of which messenger is delivering that message, and in what context. Charity fundraisers as a discipline are sometimes maligned for their short-termism compared to the long view emphasised in strategic communications. But we could learn from a common fundraiser maxim: the most optimised donation ask is the one that someone actually bothers to ask you. Not only should we have a better balance of investment between crafting the message and supporting the messengers, but the messages themselves would be more effective if developed from the start in collaboration with the people who say them.

A TED-Talk is not evidence

There's something uncomfortable about witnessing training in messaging or framing work that relies on 'the authority of science' to persuade newcomers of its importance but is rarely delivered by people who are comfortable enough with the science to engage in questions about it. This results in slidedecks proposing 'the operating system of the human brain' or simply asserting 'studies show', without interrogating what exactly those studies show, or how much weight we should give to how 12 Harvard undergraduates behaved in a test in 1998. This obfuscation around evidence even creeps into projects that test new messaging, where sometimes the threshold for success



What should come first is an understanding of power, and a theory of change for what and who these messages will target, how they will actually get used and why that has an impact



seems to be either as low as 'four people in our focus group liked it...when pressed' or as high as 'it was used in an election which our side won...so something must have worked'.

Luckily it does not have to be this way. We do not have to choose between spending big on monitoring, evaluation and learning consultants or just give up and write it off as 'hard-to-measure'. There is a promising set of tools in ORS Impact's Measuring Narrative Change that are quite accessible for anyone to have a go at, but the most important requirement is that we as a field are more transparent with our working-out, more honest with our uncertainty and more comfortable interrogating our evidence and having it be interrogated by others.

A discipline that needs democratising and diversifying

The fact that the word 'strategic' has been put in front of the word communications has not only added an extra zero to the fees being charged, it also seems to have diluted the importance of real-life communications execution. Some strategic communications recommendations do not stand up to the scrutiny of being something that you can actually send to a journalist, script in a 30-second video, or chant at a demo. This could be improved if more grassroots activists and junior communications people were involved from the beginning rather than just being trained as message carriers. There is both an ethical as well as effectiveness problem with this lack of representation, as identified by PIRC:

"many current strategic communications approaches are still: too top-down (relying on 'black box' expert research and consultancy);

too inaccessible (requiring large financial resources); or too shallow (working on single-issues in silos)."

Like all trends at the height of their hype cycle, narrative work is reckoning with the over-claiming, the bandwagon-jumping salesmen, the heated debates over minor differences, and some murmurs of backlash. But I remain optimistic about the core usefulness of this work to activists and the ability of activists to make the work more useful. Partly because at a recent activist gathering (my first back in-person!), young climate activists from across the continent turned up with a background knowledge to rival a cognitive linguistics postgrad, an interrogative spirit based on their grassroots experience to strike fear into any bluffer, and an inspiring optimism that this is a route to lasting change which they truly believe in.

Sho Walker-Konno is a communications coach for activists. His 'Bluffers Guide to Framing' and new YouTube channel about communications for activists are at ShoWalkerKonno.com

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HOW TO KEEP CLIMATE TOP OF MIND



Our new prime minister claims that drilling for more oil and gas will reduce the cost of living. Certain politicians and fossil fuel reps have been trying to make the climate crisis into a culture war for some time. It's more important than ever before that we keep climate top of mind for voters – but, how do we do this? Progressives can only resist this by knowing which stories about the climate work, argues Steve Akehurst

The story of UK public opinion on climate is large – it contains multitudes. On the one hand, despite breathless coverage to the contrary, attempts by culture warriors to polarise public attitudes on climate have not worked. Support for net-zero policies remains resolutely high, including in key electoral battlegrounds. The climate sector's narrative that renewables are the only route to energy security prevails with voters.

At the same time this is clearly a moment of some danger. So much else in the world competes for attention. And while all is left to play for, it's not obvious the new prime minister will have as much instinctive sympathy for climate as former PM Boris Johnson.

For that reason it's never been more urgent that public permission for climate action be sustained and renewed.

But, one of the by-products of the climate crisis being so multifaceted is that there are almost infinite ways to discuss it. You can focus on risk or opportunity, jobs or generations, humans, or the natural world, and so on. This raises the question: which of these many stories is the most powerful in building permission for climate action with ordinary voters?

This question is given added urgency by the emergence of climate sceptics like the

Net Zero Scrutiny Group in Westminster, and in sections of the media. While their arguments are often without evidence, they tell a relatively consistent story about climate policy: that it will do nothing other than leave us all 'colder and poorer'. While the appeal of this message with voters is often significantly overstated by political and media elites, it is still important to be mindful of it – and do what we can to maintain and build support for climate action among the public.



Message, of course, is not everything. A good message alone is not enough to keep a campaign airborne but not having one at all is enough to ensure it never gets off the ground to begin with



There are numerous ways we can rise to that challenge. Rebuttal is important where necessary, of course. But so is telling our own compelling story to voters. A big task is keeping the salience – that is, prioritisation – of the climate crisis high among ordinary voters, especially as other issues (such as the cost of living or the war in Ukraine) compete for the public's attention. But it is incumbent on those arguing for this action to provide frontline communicators with practical recommendations, based on evidence, on how this can be done.

Message, of course, is not everything. A good message alone is not enough to keep a campaign airborne (messengers, medium and movement infrastructure are also crucial), but not having one at all is enough to ensure it never gets off the ground to begin with.

Determining how best to talk about the climate is challenging. Focus group work, for instance, offers insights but not definitive conclusions on the messages we should use. Dividing the population into segmentations, such as those offered by Britain Talks Climate, is designed to tell us who we need to move to our way of thinking, but not always how. Likewise, much polling research uses methodologies (for instance support/oppose statements) that ably test agreement with individual policies or value statements but they are not designed to measure or observe prioritisation of, or persuasion to,



our campaign objectives.

All of which can make it hard for climate campaigners to decide which theme or message to invest in.

We need messages that inoculate voters from the culture war division on climate change, and build and sustain further public support for climate action

But how?

I recently completed some research for the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in which I try and provide some small part of the answer. The research rests on a straightforward mental exercise. If, theoretically, we were to spend a decent amount of resource on a big proactive campaign aimed at sustaining public permission for climate action, what thematic story should we choose?

The research tested 10 pro-climate messages via YouGov with a large sample of UK voters in April 2022 using randomised control trial (RCT) alongside some basic polling of potential messengers.

Our sample was randomly divided into 11 groups and each shown one of 10 different climate messages, or a control message. The 10 messages were:

- Climate impacts: The impacts of climate change are here now and will get worse if we don't act. But it's not too late.
- Levelling up/community regeneration: Climate policy can help re-make or 'level up' communities.
- Future generations: We have a duty to help younger generations avoid the worst effects of climate change.
- Jobs: Climate policy can create good, secure, well-paying jobs.
- Natural world: Climate change is destroying natural habitats and species, aka the 'David Attenborough narrative'.
- Consumer benefit: Amid a cost of living crisis, climate policy can help bring down people's bills.
- Energy security: Climate action helps us kick our dependence on gas from rogue foreign governments.
- Global leadership: An upbeat, patriotic narrative about what Britain has done on climate thus far, and our potential to lead the world on it going forward.
- Make the polluters pay: My best approximation of the left-populist climate narrative: big corporations are responsible for climate pollution – let's make them

pay

- Social norms: Leaning into nudge theory, 'other people care about climate change – so should you!'

And what we found was: uncomplicated stories of common destiny or concern beat co-benefits.

'Global leadership', 'climate impacts' and 'future generations' appear, in this experiment at least, to be the most consistently successful narratives at achieving persuasion effects across the public at large and swing demographics. 'Natural world' also performed well.

Ultimately, the difference between these top three narratives is relatively marginal. Any of the three could be used effectively by a prospective climate campaigner who felt comfortable using them, and building content around them consistently. For instance, 'global leadership' may better suit climate-friendly politicians, especially as it is currently 'unclaimed' by any messenger, while 'climate impacts' may be the better narrative for the NGO sector.

It is notable that the most consistently

persuasive messages were all simple narratives of shared destiny or concern. These narratives are occasionally deemed outmoded or unfashionable, but it appears they remain effective with voters. For instance, exposure to the 'climate impacts' message led to 12% more people choosing climate as a top three concern. We see an echo of this in how the summer heatwave momentarily put climate back on top of the media agenda. Elsewhere, we can see 'global leadership' and 'future generations' are among those performing well at reducing support for Net Zero. Scrutiny Group's core message that "climate policy will do nothing other than leaving us colder and poorer". All three boost swing group support for the UK going above and beyond on climate.

And, luckily, the best performing narratives ('climate impacts', 'future generations', 'natural world') are ones that the climate sector can carry off authentically – if they are brought to life in the right way and stuck to with confidence.

The messages that did not perform as well included 'evelling up', 'jobs', 'consumer benefit', and 'energy security'. These are loosely what we can call 'co-benefit' narratives: stories which make the case for climate action through other issues. These messages did okay, but they didn't perform consistently. It's not clear why, but it tallies with previous research. These messages often generate high levels of agreement but, right now at least, are probably not emotional or values-led enough to move people. They are a bit transactional, falling into what David Axelrod lampooned as the "vote Labour and win a microwave" space.

It's also possible that talking to ordinary voters about climate through other issues just requires too many extra layers of engagement or understanding. In fact it can actually backfire: for instance, the 'energy security' message decreased people's willingness to bear cost for climate action – presumably because it reminded people of rising bills.

These results are somewhat counterintuitive to a lot of current wisdom on climate communications. Generally speaking, the idea that you sell the public on climate action by pointing to all its associated benefits has taken hold. Yet more orthodox messages, done well, do better.

So, what accounts for this misdirection?

Some, like the excellent More in Common, argue it's just not possible to raise the profile of climate on its own terms when big issues like the economy or health dominate. While on balance I disagree, I at least see the logic. But I've simply never seen

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No matter what we do or want climate will continue to get dragged into cost of living, economy and energy security debates. After all, words aren't magic. It's simply that we should be more discerning about when we engage these types of messages and why.

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any credible evidence that, given the choice, co-benefit messages are our best card to play with the public.

I think it's simply likely that what is happening here is a conflation of elite opinion with public opinion. Co-benefit narratives do well with politicians; they do well with activists, donors. And they do well at keeping climate relevant with journalists. All of these audiences matter, of course, they just aren't the same as voters. But we assume they are.

So what do we do now?

I do not argue that we should bury all co-benefit narratives and never speak of them again. No matter what we do or want climate will continue to get dragged into cost of living, economy and energy security debates. After all, words aren't magic.

It's simply that we should be more discerning about when we engage these types of messages and why.

With politicians or elite media, fine. And even in mainstream media if we are invited to speak on cost of living, say, we should take the opportunity so there's then a pro-climate voice in the discussion. Our counter-arguments can at least fight things to a draw.

It's just that these are arguments to be neutralised, not majored on, in my view. The vast bulk of our proactive resource should be spent on bringing to life – through great creative, interventions, infrastructure, messengers – a much broader story: reminding people of why climate action matters, through one of global leadership,

climate impacts or future generations. These just work better at creating permission for continued government action.

Finally, it's worth noting the number of times non-graduates or over-40s were persuaded to our side in the experiment. Partly this is because they start from a lower base. But partly it's because they are less engaged. When they actually hear a pro-climate messages that aligns with their values, they can be moved into our column.

We should take heart from that. They are not owned by the Net Zero Scrutiny Group, The Sun, or anyone else who claims to speak for them.

As we face up to an uncertain next decade of climate campaigning, then, in my view there should be no further prolonged discussion on what our best message is – or who can be moved and how. The evidence is there. The question is: what are we going to do with it?

Steve Akehurst is lead on insight and messaging at the Global Strategic Communications Council (GSCC)

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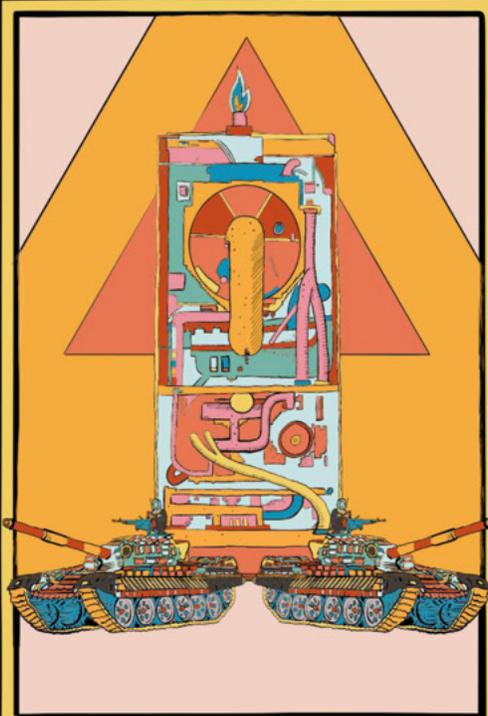
From Substack: A range of Steve's writing can be found at
<https://strongmessagehere.substack.com/>

THE FUTURE IS ALREADY HERE

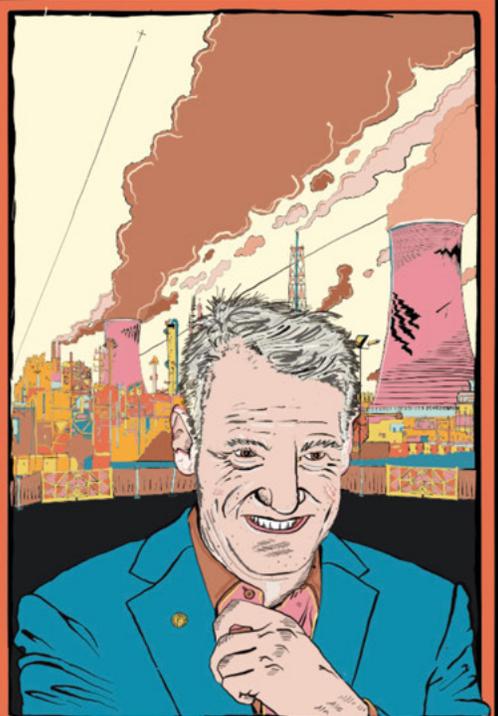
As we emerge from the worst of the pandemic into a cost of living disaster, how can we make sense of it all? **Charlie Hertzog Young** offers a message of hope.



It felt like we were nearing the end of the pandemic, or at least leaving the worst of it behind. We started to venture out, to hope for better times.



Then fuel prices went through the roof. The war in Ukraine choked oil and gas and we were getting burnt. But there were other reasons, too...



Energy execs hiked our bills by two times what they needed to. They raked in record profits, doubled salaries for bosses... they even joked about it...



While millions suffered. Many had to choose between food and heat. Even before this, 35,000 people died a year in the UK, just from cold.



With energy costs rising, we knew we had to do something. Six million living in fuel poverty wasn't acceptable. Something was gonna break.



Then we pushed back. We fought. "The future is already here, it's just not very evenly distributed," as William Gibson said. Not yet.

TOGETHER, THEY SAY YES



*With abortion rights under threat in the US, **Karen Hand** of the Together for Yes campaign talks us through the lessons and the reasons for hope that came from the historic 2018 win on abortion in Ireland*

In May 2018, the people of Ireland voted to overturn the Irish ban on abortion and introduce legislation around the termination of pregnancy. It was a landslide referendum result, with 66% voting 'Yes'. The level of turnout and the extent of the victory were both testament to the campaign devised by Together for Yes, an umbrella group made up of over 70 organisations, groups and communities from across Irish civil society. Now that the Supreme Court has ruled against the right to abortion in the US, it's important to understand what made this campaign messaging and behaviour so successful, the reasoning behind it, and what other countries with abortion rights under threat can learn from this experience.

Abortion is one of the most politically divisive subjects in the western world. People on both sides of the debate believe strongly that they are unequivocally 'right' and have a tendency to vilify the other side. From a moral point of view, both camps believe that they occupy the 'high ground' and find it hard to listen openly to those they disagree with. From an emotional point of view, debates can get heated and personal, and many bystanders fear getting caught in the crossfire.

The 2018 Irish abortion referendum proposed providing abortion to more Irish

women on home soil, repealing the 8th Amendment of the constitution. Polling showed there were questions from society as to how broad abortion provision should be: what circumstances should someone be able to access abortion – personal choice, rape, fatal foetal abnormalities, a danger to life? After how many weeks of gestation? Should there be a waiting time between decision and procedure? Should abortion require one or more medical approvals? When we conducted qualitative research in late 2016 on behalf of the 'Yes' campaign, we found that many people were highly conflicted about allowing abortion to take

place in Ireland. In addition, the electorate feared that the campaign from both sides would be angry, militant and divisive, which made some want to opt out from the whole debate. 'Yes' campaigners worried that low voter turnout would hurt their chances of success.

The first strategic decision for us was to focus on 'undecided' voters. These voters did not see abortion in black and white. They cared about the wellbeing of women but did not think about abortion access in terms of rights or personal autonomy. We called this voter group 'the concerned centre' and knew that

“Abortion is one of the most politically divisive subjects in the western world. People on both sides of the debate believe strongly that they are unequivocally 'right' and have a tendency to vilify the other side.”

we could not force them to change their minds – we needed to listen to them and talk about abortion in ways that resonated with their own moral priorities. We needed to ask them to care for women, rather than instruct them to acknowledge women’s rights. We needed to acknowledge they felt empathy with women making an abortion decision but they also felt sad that she didn’t want or feel able to have a child at this juncture. We need to help them believe it was possible to collectively make this change together in Irish society. This led to the development of the Together for Yes campaign values: care, compassion and change.

Second, we recognised that the concerned centre wanted to balance care for women with the needs of society at large. They saw abortion as strongly impacting women but also having ripple effects on partners and existing (or potential) families. The ‘Yes’ campaign needed to acknowledge that abortion could be a difficult dilemma for more than one person – from sexual partners to family members – rather than always an individual choice for the pregnant person. Together for Yes needed to reflect this complexity while guiding the concerned centre towards supporting abortion in Ireland. This led to a finely tuned message of care in the launch poster: “Sometimes a private matter needs public support”.

Third, we identified the trustworthy experts that could help the concerned centre feel comfortable voting ‘Yes’. Qualitative and quantitative research showed that medical doctors and nurses were the people that the electorate trusted to know what the best caring framework would be for Irish society. Knowing that medical professionals had ethical training and experience grounded in the Hippocratic Oath to ‘do no harm’ gave the public reassurance that these abortions would be provided in a humane way. This guided Together for Yes to work closely with eminent obstetricians and authorities in maternity and reproductive care and partner with groups like Doctors for Choice.

Fourth, we had to help the concerned centre understand that abortion was already a reality for many Irish people. We did this by raising consciousness around the amount of people who had already had abortions, the amount travelling to the UK to get abortions and the amount of abortion pills that were imported into the country. This reality check needed to be delivered in a calm but consistent manner to help people accept that voting No would not change these facts, but voting Yes would allow people get the supportive abortion care they needed safely, legally, and in their own

“Listening openly and working together is far from easy, but the success of the Together for Yes campaign shows that it is possible to work with and across very different groups of people to achieve progressive change, even on polarising issues like abortion”

country. This led Together for Yes to start a ‘story lab’ which collected and disseminated real stories of Irish people travelling overseas to receive abortions, women taking the abortion pill without medical supervision or being refused abortion despite serious complications in pregnancy, alongside Facebook campaigns like In Her Shoes.

The final critical strategic decision was to develop Together for Yes as an umbrella campaign co-led by the National Women’s Council, the Coalition to Repeal the 8th and the Abortion Rights Campaign. This required calm, strong and tenacious leadership which kept members focused on the end-game, rather than fuelling factional fighting. They sometimes needed to negotiate with their own ‘base’ of pro-choice organisations, especially around emotive issues like whether there should be any gestation limits or waiting times on abortion access or whether women should have to wait between deciding to have an abortion and having the procedure but the ‘Yes’ campaign leadership kept focused on the need for positive change and momentum. As one ‘Yes’ politician expressed mid-campaign, “Some progress is better than no progress”.

The fight for the right to abortion might have been won in Ireland, but abortion rights are under threat worldwide. As we watch the American Supreme Court reverse legislation protecting abortion access in the US, what can other countries learn from the Together for Yes campaign? Some pro-choice activists in the US have already been inspired by the Irish campaign in the materials developed by ASO Communications around ‘Someone You Love’.

First, put the societal mission front and

centre – make it clear that providing access to abortion for women is more than a rights issue and will contribute to overall societal health and wellbeing. Second, practice a politics of inclusion and collaboration and build a shared umbrella platform for change. Third, recognise and respect what other people feel and want – even if you strongly disagree with them. Respect their moral integrity and work with them to co-create a journey towards a more compassionate supportive society.

Listening openly and working together is far from easy, but the success of the Together for Yes campaign shows that it is possible to work with and across very different groups of people to achieve progressive change, even on polarising issues like abortion.

Karen Hand is a social psychologist and brand strategist who conducted the qualitative research with the public and politicians to guide the Together for Yes campaign.

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THE RACE CLASS NARRATIVE

WHY WE NEED A UNIFYING NARRATIVE



For years in the US, progressives have debated whether election campaigns should focus on courting white working class voters or Black and brown ones. But, writes **Jillian Marcellus**, we don't have to choose.

America is at a crossroads between Trump Republicans who would take us backwards by overthrowing the will of the people, controlling our lives, and ruling for the wealthy few, and voters who can move us forward to protect our families, our freedoms, and our futures. The next few elections will determine which path we take.

For years, Democrats and progressives have battled with the idea that, in order to win elections or campaigns, we have two options: Either, we must focus on persuading undecided 'middle of the road' swing voters. Or, we must focus on animating our 'base': a progressive but as yet unengaged group of people who share our values. This "persuasion versus mobilisation" debate has stood in as a colourblind proxy for whether we prioritise wooing white voters (which, conventional wisdom insists, requires holding our tongues about race) or animating Black and brown ones (which requires attending to necessarily racialised issues). But these long-held assumptions are demonstrably false and politically destructive.

First, if your words don't spread, they don't work. This is especially true for swing voters. Research demonstrates they hold a range of policy preferences and are relatively more malleable thinkers, attracted to what feels familiar and 'common sense'. This means that engaging our base isn't just important for mobilising people who are already on our side – it's also vital in getting our supporters to repeat our message over and over so we can reach and persuade conflicted voters.

Second, removing ourselves from conversations about race doesn't make the topic disappear. Deliberate division, manifested through racially-coded speech or imagery, is at the core of the right-wing strategy to turn working people against each other in order to undermine public support for government and shared prosperity. It was deployed as Nixon's 'Southern Strategy', cemented through Reagan's "welfare queen,"

and amplified through Trump's entire vocabulary. Neither a colourblind appeal for economic populism nor a race-only approach can withstand the right's dog-whistling. To inoculate against our opposition's narrative, we must expose the right-wing tactic of deliberate division and racialised scapegoating that keeps us from demanding the things we need for a good life.

Looking this challenge in the face, the Race Class Narrative (RCN) is a proven messaging and organising framework that weaves together race and class, advances our progressive worldview, and counters right-wing divide and conquer politics. RCN builds cross-racial solidarity, fueling desire for a government that serves us all, and linking shared economic prosperity directly to racial justice.

Research consistently shows that speaking affirmatively about race strengthens our ability to mobilise our base and persuade the undecided middle, *and* allows us to challenge our opposition's worldview – but what we say and how we structure it matters. RCN messages follow a specific architecture drawn from broader research in political communication:

- 1) Open with a shared value, naming or visually depicting race and class;
- 2) Name and expose the tactics and motivations of the real culprits of our hardships, narrating how they distract, divide or scapegoat along racial lines;
- 3) Emphasize unity and collective action to address the problem and implement the solution;
- 4) Deliver an aspirational vision and the tangible outcomes that we can achieve by joining together across race, place, and difference. In more limited formats like social media not all elements of the messaging architecture may be included.

RCN has been empirically tested using multiple methodologies across regions and issues. It consistently outperforms competing progressive narratives among our base (predominantly people of color, young

people, unmarried women and LGBTQ people) and among voters who can be persuaded on policy issues (these overlap significantly with 'swing voters' in the world of elections).

More importantly, organizers across the US have adopted RCN to win campaigns and elections.

In 2018, a multiracial coalition in Minnesota came together behind an RCN-branded campaign, Greater than Fear, which helped elect progressives and Democrats by strong margins up and down the ballot in the midterm elections.

In 2020, through a project formerly called Race Class Narrative Action, now newly named We Make the Future Action, over 2,000 state leaders and organizers trained in RCN launched seven statewide RCN-driven campaigns in the midwestern United States. These state coalitions were able to successfully implement RCN to win legislation, local races, and flip several of their states in the presidential election. The full summary of these efforts and how RCN contributed to increased votes can be seen in the RCN Action Election Update (2020).

By using a race and class-forward narrative that is grounded in shared values, exposes the motivations and divisive tactics of our opposition, and paints a beautiful and compelling vision for the future we want to achieve, we can and will win.

Jillian Marcellus is director of narrative at ASO Communications

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BUILDING A NEW NARRATIVE



*We're looking down the barrel of a cold, difficult winter. But some politicians want us to think the biggest threat facing the UK is the 'wokemob'. **Ayesha Baloch** tells us how new research shows how progressives should respond*

We are currently in the midst of the worst cost of living crisis of a generation, soaring energy bills, a climate crisis, a government that collapsed like a house of cards and moved onto the third prime minister this year. Yet, certain politicians, parts of the media and public figures will still have you believe that the biggest threat facing the United Kingdom is the scourge of the so-called 'wokemob'.

Look no further than the first Conservative leadership election earlier this year, where it became clear that the platform of choice for most candidates was a pushback against 'wokery'. From Suella Braverman's pledge to "get rid of all this woke rubbish" to accusations that Penny Mordaunt is "too woke" to be leader, it is evident that this will continue to be a focal point in British politics next year.

Meanwhile, over the past year, the Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS) have been working in collaboration with ASO Communications on the UK Race-Class Narrative (RCN) project, which seeks to neutralise the divide and rule tactics used by certain sections of the right. The UK RCN uses methodology from the overwhelmingly successful American project, implemented during a number of US state elections and

the 2020 Presidential Elections which tested seven progressive narratives, of which six registered more positively with the public than a Trumpian 'opposition' message.

Using a survey and innovative dial testing, we have spent the past year testing messages and collecting data on public attitudes towards topics related to race and class, using the Race Class Narrative method co-developed by ASO Communications.

Unsurprisingly, our research found that this narrative of the 'wokemob' - though constructed by a relatively small section of hard-right politicians, parts of the media and very privileged public figures - has been remarkably successful.

Central to this story is the idea of the 'traditional' or 'authentic' white working class who have been left behind and who strive to uphold true British values against the yoke of political correctness enforced by the 'wokemob'. The 'wokemob' are seen to favour undeserving minorities and immigrants over the white working class. Racial justice and equality are thus portrayed as a zero-sum game in which minorities and immigrants gain unfair privileges at the expense of everyone else. By pitting the white working class and the 'wokemob' against each other in a false binary, the right has embroiled us in what they term the 'culture war'.

Through analysing the narrative landscape, the UK Race Class Narrative project found that this story is well understood, emotive, persuasive and effective in dividing persuadable working-class people by race and ethnicity.

Many on the hard right genuinely subscribe to these beliefs, but they have also used this narrative to distract from the multitude of issues the UK faces today, whether it be the multiple scandals that have plagued the current government or the cost of living crisis. Our research found that only 10% of the public strongly share hard-right beliefs, while 60% actually have undecided or 'persuadable' political views. And it is through this narrative of the 'wokemob' that our opponents on the right have been so successful in gaining the support of the persuadables. By presenting the anti-woke story and a summation of the current progressive response to our participants, the UK RCN found the anti-woke story to be the decisive winner. Worse still, one in three people who took part in our research couldn't even remember what the progressive response was immediately after hearing it, let alone decide whether they liked it.

In the face of such a dangerously effective narrative which shows no signs of abating, progressives are at best avoiding the issue and at worst legitimising it. From

analysing communications, we found that progressive actors are falling into certain traps laid by our opponents. By echoing the sentiment that Britain is in the midst of a war of cultural values, we legitimise this dangerous theory. Meanwhile, by repeating their phrases in an attempt to refute them, we are unwittingly ingraining them further into the public consciousness. Worse still, we have not provided a compelling alternative narrative of our own. While the right have painted a vivid picture of what their Britain would look like, we found that current progressive messaging is easily forgotten, less persuasive to the persuadable section of the population and generates only lukewarm support from our base.

However, there is hope. Our research found that working class people in Britain are far more united than the right suggests. Working class people are not a homogenous block, and instead encompass many ethnicities and nationalities, occupations, incomes, education and political beliefs. What actually binds working class people across race and other differences are their shared experiences of precarity, prejudice and a lack of power and an uncertain sense of place, and above all, their values.

Moreover, through empirical testing, we

found that using phrases and terms to build a narrative of unity around people's shared material interests actually outperformed the right's divisive anti-woke story. Our tried-and-tested messages come directly from listening to working class people. They communicate the truth that there is a small elite making decisions against the common interests and connect the necessity of people uniting (across race and class) to secure a better future for us all. These new narratives, through creating an inclusive 'us' by using intersectional language and emphasising what we have in common – ie what we want and value – have the power to neutralise our opponents' messaging. Most importantly, these messages are effective.

As proven by the original US Race Class Narrative project, the core formula of the RCN framework is as follows:

- Value: Open with a shared value that explicitly includes people across race and economic status lines to build cross-racial solidarity.
- Problem: Narrate the problem and locate this problem in certain powerful actors. Be specific about what they are doing and how it harms us.
- Solution: Communicate an aspirational

vision, being specific about the outcomes we can achieve by joining together. Emphasise how collective action helps us address the problem and implement the solutions that benefit us all.

By using this framework and joining together, we have all the tools at our fingertips to neutralise our opponents' dangerous divide and rule tactics, and present a hopeful yet viable alternative to those with persuadable views.

Moving forward, CLASS will be working in partnership with researchers, content creators, trade unions and community-based organisations and we will implement our research by building the capacity of communicators, organisers and spokespeople. We will also be running training and workshops with colleagues and fellow progressives. The workshops are designed to provide an understanding of using the Race Class Narrative in communications. It is designed for organisers, communicators, and others interested in improving their understanding of narrative and communications principles. The workshops will also be a crucial opportunity to bring together and strengthen coalitions between progressive actors.

The rise of ultra-conservative governments is not inevitable. With the right tools, deployed smartly and strategically, we can win.

Ayesha was previously CLASS's public affairs officer.

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HOW DO WE WIN THE NET ZERO CULTURE WAR?

*Once a preserve of American politics, the culture war has exploded into the UK. Next in the culture warriors' sights? The government's climate targets. Organisers and campaigners should build trust to overcome this politics of fear, argues **Diyora Shadijanova***



For a long time, climate denialism felt like a distinctly American issue. Nearly a decade ago, it was revealed that 64 US thinktanks were lobbying on behalf of major corporations and right-wing donors to oppose climate policies. Not many can forget Donald Trump infamously calling global warming “an expensive hoax” or leaning into sinophobia by blaming it on “the Chinese”. Many of us in the UK might have never dared to imagine such life-threatening ideas crossing the Atlantic to enter the mainstream. After all, despite receiving large amounts of money from fossil fuel interests and climate sceptics, even the Conservative party largely acknowledges the climate crisis being man-made and passed a law to get the country to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, after much public pressure. Yet it seems British climate denialism has finally taken root on our soil, in the form of a ‘net zero’ culture war.

Today, a growing number of the right is pushing an anti-net zero agenda, which argues that existing net zero climate policies are driving the cost of living crisis and that there are ‘potential economic benefits’ to warming

temperatures. At the forefront of this ‘inactivist’ movement is Steve Baker MP, a trustee of the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF), created by Conservative Lord Nigel Lawson in 2009. The foundation campaigns as ‘Net Zero Watch’ and has recently been revealed to be funded by US oil money. Just last year, the GWPF conference hosted a scientist who urged authoritative bodies to “stand up and say there is no climate crisis”. A similarly named Net Zero Scrutiny Group (NZSG), set up by Baker, consists of over 50 Tory MPs and peers closely connected to a US lobbyist. NZSG has called for cuts to green taxes and strives for an increase in fossil fuel production.

At the same time, the notorious former leader of UKIP and the Brexit Party, Nigel Farage, is leading a new campaign called “Vote Power Not Poverty” which makes insubstantial claims that net zero policies will make the older generation “colder and poorer due to higher energy bills” and “harm young people and future generations with fewer jobs”. This flies in the face of the facts: studies show that it is an unmitigated climate crisis set to rob everyone of their futures. Members of the group include former Brexit Party MEPs

Richard Tice and David Bull and GB News pundit Dominique Samuels. Their ambition is to force a referendum on the UK’s net zero commitment.

One would think that all of this creates a compelling case for opposition parties like Labour to take a strong stance on tackling the escalating ecological crisis, especially after committing to a Green New Deal last year. Yet in April, the party called for a nationwide injunction to “simplify police operations by making it easier to make arrests” of climate activists taking direct action. This pro-policing stance is alienating many voters, especially as it makes the same arguments as those found in the terrifying new Public Order Bill, in which the government plans to crack down on protesters and increase stop and search powers.

Clearly, the evolving climate culture war seeks to not only further destabilise the landscape of British politics by exploiting crises for their own benefit and leaving millions of the poor poorer, but it’s also highly beneficial to those with their hands in the pockets of Big Oil. After all, the Tories are still receiving millions from fossil fuel interests in gifts

and donations.

So for those fighting for climate justice, a vital question forms: how do we win the growing net zero culture war?

If we are to learn anything from the last decade of the British media landscape, it's that culture wars – whether they're on the plight of refugees, 'wokeness' or trans rights – only seek to benefit those stoking them, because they successfully polarise voters on issues they may not even feel strongly about. In the fight against the climate crisis, such divisions are harmful, and frankly, cannot be afforded due to critical time pressures. The more oxygen culture wars are given by mainstream media outlets and progressives, the harder their fire seems to burn. In 2015 there were 21 articles about 'culture wars' in mainstream British newspapers. Five years later, that number shot up to 534. What happened during that time? The platforming of fringe ideas in the mainstream.

Publications and media outlets struggling with audience engagement struck a gold mine with culture war content. Cut-up clips of the drama orchestrated by shows like BBC Question Time and ITV's Good Morning Britain resulted in outrage clicks, driving more revenue to their channels. While some programmes no longer rely on debates about the existence of the climate crisis, we've seen a sharp rise of commentators denying its severity in recent times. Yet the only 'winners' of such events seem to be polluters, the media outlets coordinating the gladiator-like panel debates and the panellists seeking to grow their own careers by spitting bile *they* might not even believe in. Need I mention Piers Morgan's careerist history of contradictory politics?

This means to stop the germination and legitimisation of toxic fringe ideas, progressives shouldn't spend all their time engaging with the culture wars at the expense of focusing their energies somewhere more useful.

Even if those starting the net-zero culture wars know their arguments aren't backed by science, conspiratorial ideas like climate denialism are highly attractive to a public increasingly fearful of their material futures. With the cost of living crisis brought on by a decade of austerity and a Covid-19 pandemic as well as a potential recession looming, a perfect atmosphere forms for 'climate sceptics' to peddle lies. But as many will know, arguing with conspiracy theorists is almost impossible. No matter how hard you try to counter their assertions with facts, they will only move the goalposts.

Therefore, the opposite of conspiratorial thinking isn't truth: it's trust. Successful climate movement building requires



Starting small with local environmental issues is critical because local problems are the most tangible. Only when trust and connection is established in groups can we take on more significant issues in the form of coalitions. A politics of fear is most effectively fought with a politics of hope



connection, which can only be achieved through grassroots organising. Starting small with local environmental issues is critical because local problems are the most tangible. Only when trust and connection is established in groups can we take on more significant issues in the form of coalitions. A politics of fear is most effectively fought with a politics of hope, which is what climate justice offers.

The climate crisis is a 'threat-multiplier', meaning that climate justice is in a unique position to connect social struggles, making it a beneficial cause for the majority of the global population. Instead of treating the climate crisis as a problem in a vacuum, as many have done in the past, it's vital to communicate how the premises of climate justice would not only improve everyone's lives but also, the unique social issues they might be facing, whether that's concerns over women's bodily autonomy, violent policing, rising energy bills or the housing crisis

If climate groups stay focused on organising in communities, direct action, and fostering meaningful connections on a grassroots level and the rest of us pay less attention to the dangerous culture wars,

net-zero sceptics could only lose, because no amount of dirty oil money can break apart people's unity.

Diyora Shadijanova is a writer, multimedia journalist and climate editor of gal-dem magazine.

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TALKING TAX



With our new prime minister promising a tax cut bonanza, Paul Hebden digs into where our attitudes towards taxes come from. He finds its roots in the runup to the 2008 financial crisis

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, an economic crisis incubated and caused by a reckless and out of control banking system transformed into a drive for full-blown public austerity. And we continue to witness the consequences of it today.

But Brits didn't suddenly wake up one day and decide we needed an austerity drive to cut public spending. So where did the idea come from? Academic Mike Berry studied how the media responded to the 2008 financial crisis, and found that a narrative about 'public sector waste' had been building for years, and reached a crescendo in 2009.

Berry's research found a 600% rise in mostly negative media stories between 2000 and 2009 that was crucial to what he calls the "socialisation of support for austerity". He notes how words and phrases like "inefficiency", "waste", "non-jobs", "bloated", "gold-plated pensions", "benefit cheat", "skiver" and "scrounger" became ever more prominent in news stories in the years preceding the financial crash.

So by the time tax revenues collapsed in 2009/10 and 'the deficit' between the amount the government got in tax and the amount it spent loomed into view, the public was already primed to accept cuts as the solution. Years of public sector waste were held up as part of the reason the economy was in a mess, despite the crisis itself having its roots in the failures of the global financial system.

The media didn't decide to write stories

about waste purely of their own volition however. The narrative was partly fed by campaigners. It's no coincidence that the Taxpayers Alliance was set up in 2002 with a remit to deliver a steady stream of 'research' stories about waste in the public sector.

Part of the reason the Taxpayers Alliance has been so effective is that they barely talk about tax at all. Instead they promote a kind of meta-narrative about waste. The theory of change seems to be that, by undermining public confidence in the ability of collective institutions to properly spend 'taxpayers' money', they can head off support for higher taxes, particularly on corporations or the wealthy.

This has created dividing lines in the public's mind, between 'taxpayers' who

contribute to the public pot, and others (bureaucrats, politicians, the unemployed and migrants) who take away from it.

In late 2019, Tax Justice UK set off on a journey to understand what people in the UK think about tax. The result was our report, *How to talk about tax*.

What we found during the course of 11 focus groups and two opinion polls was that people don't spend much of their time thinking about tax and the economy. Tax is complicated, and when we asked them to think about it they reached for familiar cultural understandings and metaphors to explain what it meant to them. Chief among these was the idea that the economy is like a container, that 'taxpayers' pay tax into, and 'others' take away from. But tax was

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...people don't spend much of their time thinking about tax and the economy. Tax is complicated, and when we asked them to think about it they reached for familiar cultural understandings and metaphors to explain what it meant to them”

also seen as something that bonds people together and can help pay for good things - the NHS being the most obvious example.

For those of us who believe that our taxes are a vital way of reducing inequality and funding our public services, the research uncovered some big wins. It found widespread public support for taxes on wealth, disgust and anger at tax avoidance, and an understanding that tax can and does help create great public services. There was also evidence that this 'waste' narrative had cut through (it's worth noting that it's also a core part of the current Labour Party pitch on the economy). However, despite the cynical moves of some campaign groups, Brits do see themselves as part of something bigger and understand tax can be part of it.

If you want to communicate a more progressive story on tax, you have to give people hope that the system can change. People are often cynical and fatalistic about the tax system, especially when it comes to the behaviour of big companies, the wealthy and politicians. It is important that we give hope that things can change, and be loud about the times that we made change happen. But this should be tempered with realism: people understand that tax is largely a force for good but they will never love paying tax.

People see that public services have been hollowed out and they do want more investment. The public do support tax increases so we should call for them, particularly on wealth, and link these proposals to supporting public services. But it's important to do this while being mindful that not all public services are paid for by tax. The government has a large degree of control over the economy and politicians have many tools for supporting public investment beyond tax, including borrowing and quantitative easing.

The public hate tax avoidance. If you are angry about it, they will support you. But always try to point to ways in which politicians can fix the system.

When talking about wealth, it's important to be specific. Don't talk as if it's inherently bad. For people who are struggling to afford life's essentials, the idea of wealth is not an inherently bad thing. People quite admire the wealthy and often find generic 'rich-bashing' divisive. Focus on how the tax system can support collective security so that no one needs to worry about building big individual safety nets.

Make sure you explain everything in straightforward, everyday language. People's knowledge of the tax system is limited. It's better you risk looking a bit patronising than saying things nobody understands.



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Use common metaphors to help people understand difficult concepts, or ideas that are usually only discussed in numerical terms – like how much money actually constitutes being rich. If you're talking about fairness, make sure you explain exactly what you mean, as different people have very different ideas of what 'fair' looks like.

When talking about the economy, it's more effective to use metaphors that emphasise how the economy is human-made - and that it can be changed to build a better world. Be very wary of talking about the economy as a big pot where money is either contributed or drained (this is sometimes called the 'container model'). Stress that tax and public spending play crucial roles in building things that we collectively need

We are living through a cost of living crisis and political decisions about tax are a central part of it. So much so that the current moment sometimes feels more like a scandal than a crisis. The decision to increase national insurance this year and not capital gains (a tax whose lower rates overwhelmingly benefit the already wealthy) feels scandalous. The ability of companies to profit off the back of rising energy prices is obviously scandalous. With our new PM committing to tax cuts which will cut the money available for public services, and mainly benefit the wealthy, the

arguments on tax are still not yet won.

However, we have also seen some wins, partly informed by the fact that the public are behind us. The most obvious recent example is the windfall tax on energy companies, a move that challenges the decades old political-economic dogma that the state has no role to play in protecting families from inflation.

We won a windfall tax and with the cost of living crisis showing no signs of abating the moment feels ripe to push for further wins. With the right story, why not a wealth tax next?

Paul Hebden is head of communications at Tax Justice UK

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HOW TO START A CLIMATE CONVERSATION



In an extract from her new book, 'Saving Us', Katharine Hayhoe explains why we can't simply divide people into climate 'believers' and 'deniers', and how to open up conversations about the climate crisis with the people around us

We often assume that the tribes that form around climate change can be sorted into two categories: them and us. In reality, though, it's a lot more complicated than that. I also have a problem with the labels that are most often applied to those categories: believers and deniers.

I object to "believers" because climate change is not, at its core, a matter of faith. I don't "believe" in science: I make up my mind based on facts and data, much of which can be seen and shared. Not only that, but climate change is often deliberately—and very successfully—framed as an alternate, Earth-worshipping religion. This is sometimes subtle, as the church sign that reads, "On Judgement Day, you'll meet Father God not Mother Earth." Other times this point is made much more explicitly, like

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when Senator Ted Cruz told Glenn Beck in 2015 that "climate change is not science, it's religion," and Senator Lindsey Graham said in 2014 that "the problem is Al Gore's turned this thing into religion."

And while it may be convenient for some climate advocates to dismiss their opponents as "deniers," it's an unhelpful label if you want to win people over. I've also seen it applied all too often to shut down discussion, rather than encourage it, through stereotyping and dismissing anyone who expresses any doubts about the reality of climate change.

Instead, I prefer the classification system created by researchers Tony Leiserowitz and Ed Maibach. Called *Global Warming's Six Americas*, it divides people into six groups rather than just two. Tony and Ed have tracked changes in these groups nationally since 2008. At one end of the spectrum, there are the Alarmed, the only group that has grown significantly since they began

the study. The Alarmed are convinced global warming is a serious and immediate threat but many still don't know what to do about it. In 2008, they made up just 18 percent of the U.S. population. By the end of 2019, they had reached 31 percent, before falling back to 26 percent in 2020. The next group, the Concerned, also accept the science and support climate policies, but see the threat as more distant. They started at 33 percent in 2008 and moved down to 28 percent by 2020 as more became Alarmed. The number of the Cautious, who still need to be convinced that the problem is real, serious, and urgent, has remained steady around 20 percent. The Disengaged are people who know little and care less. They've gone from 12 percent in 2008 to 7 percent in 2020. Next there are the 11 percent of Americans who remain Doubtful and don't consider climate change a serious risk, or consider it much at all. Finally, at the far end of the spectrum, there are the 7 percent who remain Dismissive. Angrily rejecting the idea that human-caused climate change is a threat, they are most receptive to misinformation and conspiracy theories.

How do we talk about climate change constructively with the 93 percent? Unfortunately, our instincts can lead us astray here, too. As we get more and more worried, we often feel compelled to dump scary data on people so they will share our fear. Scientists publish report after report warning of melting ice sheets, scorching heat waves, devastating rainfall events, unprecedented wildfires, and ever more powerful hurricanes. We desperately want to sound the alarm—and we're not wrong. Climate change *is* alarming. But our natural reaction often makes the situation worse, not better.

Research on everything from airplane seatbelts to hand washing in hospitals shows that bad-news warnings are more likely to make people check out than change their behavior. And the more vivid and dire the picture painted, the less responsive the recipient. "Fear and anxiety [can] cause us to withdraw, to freeze, to give up, rather than take action," neuroscientist Tali Sharot explains in her book *The Influential Mind*. So if arguing with the 7 percent who are

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Climate change affects nearly everything that we already care about. It will make us and our children less healthy, our communities less prosperous, and our world less stable.”

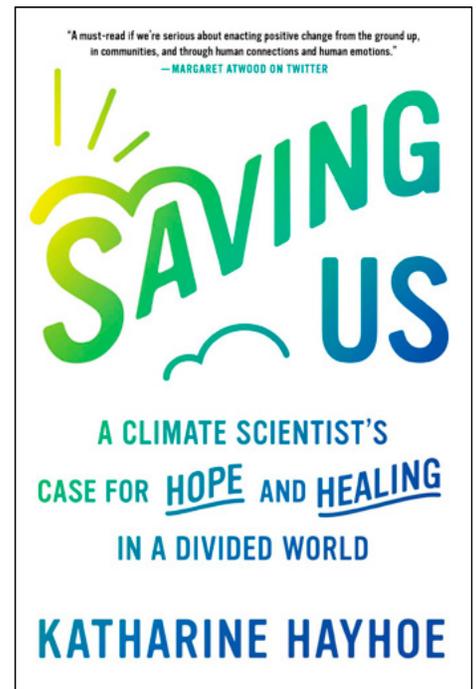
Dismissives and dumping more scary information on the other 93% of people doesn't really work, is there anything that does?

Yes, there is.

Start with something you have in common. Connect it to why climate change matters to us personally—not the human race in its entirety or the Earth itself, but rather us as individuals. Climate change affects nearly everything that we already care about. It will make us and our children less healthy, our communities less prosperous, and our world less stable. Often, in fact, it already has.

Then, describe what people can and are doing to fix it. There are all kinds of solutions, from cutting our own food waste to powering buses with garbage to using solar energy to transform the lives of some of the poorest people in the world. There are solutions that clean up our air and our water, grow local economies, encourage nature to thrive, and leave us all better off, not worse. Who doesn't want that?

Katharine Hayhoe is a climate scientist and chief scientist for The Nature Conservancy, the endowed professor in Public Policy and Public Law and Paul W. Horn distinguished professor at Texas Tech University.



ALL WORK & NO PLAY



*The last few years of disruption have left many of us re-evaluating our relationship with work. **Sofie Jenkinson** explores how progressives can use this opportunity to create a new narrative*

The pandemic threw our lives up in the air, as our jobs, time with friends and family, and routines were upended. This gave many of us a chance to re-evaluate what is important and what we need for our lives to be fulfilling. Number one on that list for many of us: work.

Half a million people have left the British workforce since the start of the pandemic and a recent survey from PwC showed 20% of the workforce planned on quitting this year. There are a plethora of reasons for this, including ill health, but what is certainly true is that the pandemic has given people space to think about their relationship with work.

So how do people come to conclusions about what is right, good or fair when it comes to our working lives? If we want to change the rules of our economy for a better society, it's vital that we understand how people feel and think about work because it drives much more than our own personal choices.

What we believe about work is complex. It's usually deeply connected to how we were brought up, our values or influential moments in history. But there are some common threads in the way we usually think and talk about work. Work (especially 'hard' work) is often seen as innately moral and 'laziness' inherently immoral; success and failure in work are seen as result of an individual's own effort level and value; and there are deep rooted feelings around fairness and reward that, despite our preoccupation with effort, often don't correlate.

How have these become the most common ways for us to think about work? We are being served cultural and political messages on this all the time. Everything from Thomas the Tank Engine's hard working, kiss-ass spirit to Kim Kardashian saying "It seems like no one wants to work these days", to commentators lauding various members of the Royal Family's "sense of duty and work ethic" and through to chunks of the bible.

One thing is clear: beliefs about work are deeply entrenched and there's plenty of polling

and attitudinal research to back this up. In the UK, class impacts attitudes towards work more than in other countries. Research by the Sutton Trust, looking at the Great British Class Survey, found that the top one percent are more likely to cite hard work as the reason for success than other groups. This meritocratic attitude is the bread-and-butter of conservative messaging: work is a route out of poverty; 'worklessness' and 'laziness' are passed down through generations; people just need to 'get on their bike' to find a good job; and poor people can be divided into the 'deserving and 'undeserving'. This leads to a status quo that punishes people for a lack of success no matter the barriers they face and is punitive with those that need help. It builds support for lower wages and low social security by blaming and demonising individuals for the 'moral failing' of needing help or failing to succeed.

What's more worrying is that there has, at times, been a paper-thin difference between the language used by progressives and the right when it comes to work. Progressives trying to change the rules of our economy will never build public consensus around our ideas if we keep using the language of the status quo.

Recently I analysed the language we use when we're talking about work to try and understand more about where our deeply-held beliefs and the way we talk about work might originate. Is it passed down in families? It is simply because of religion? Or is it cultural? I looked at the language used by politicians, commentators in the media, activists, advocates and cultural figures, as well as across social media and forums like Reddit from around 2010 until today, to see if there were recurring patterns. I also looked at whether attitudes to work have changed as work itself has changed, how attitudes and language go in and out of vogue, where trends (e.g. phrases like 'scrounger') come from and whether the pandemic has changed the way we think about work.

Through my analysis I found that the way

that people talk about work largely falls into one of three categories: work as subsistence; work as something to better yourself – either materially or morally; and work as exploitation – either about exploitation literally (unpaid overtime, lack of flexibility, reductions in pay) or ways of standing up to exploitation (e.g. through unions).

First, the 'work as subsistence' narrative, which says that work exists so that we have money to provide for ourselves and our families. It uses work in its simplest form: I do something, you pay me, I go home.

This type of language has been more common as the cost of living has skyrocketed in the UK and more people struggle to afford life's essentials. The problem is this language is often used in a passive way for example: "Work has changed beyond recognition" or "work must pay". This language implies things will simply happen, with no human intervention at all, and doesn't explain why people are struggling to afford the basics or whose fault it might be. This leaves room for individual blame, fails to frame the issue structurally and is unlikely to persuade anyone of anything.

Second, work as improvement. Work as material improvement really is just good old-fashioned meritocracy. This is a very popular way of talking about work and is often treated as fact. It is different from subsistence framing in that material improvement is about doing well, in monetary terms, but also about moving up in society and achieving. It's littered with anecdotes about self-made millionaires, people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps or getting on their bike to find a job. The underlying implication being: "You're poor? It's your fault. I didn't need help getting to where I am." Conservative Party Chair Jake Berry used this frame recently when he suggested that the best course of action for people worried about rising costs was simply to "go out there and get higher salary or higher wages...go out there and get that new job".

The second part of work as improvement is

work as moral improvement. This is where you see language around self-sacrifice, proving your worth and 'doing the right thing'. It's connected to material improvement because to not attempt to - or succeed - in improving yourself materially is, we are told, a moral failing. This is why over the last few months we've seen the government completely at ease with telling people facing a 10-11% inflation rate and unprecedentedly high bills that "work is the best way out".

The language of improvement places all the blame, responsibility and achievement on the individual. It centres work, and success through work, as the most important thing in life. If you really think about it, this frame forms the basis of so many of the stories you've heard since you were a kid, like the three little pigs and Aesop's grasshopper and the ant. It is also recognisable in modern culture, we see it in trends like 'grind culture', typified by the Kardashians' reality show, which glorifies 'hard work' at the expense of all other things (Hello, *Devil Wears Prada*) and indicates that any lack of success on your part is simply due to lack of effort.

Third we have the frame of work as exploitation. For example: "We already work the longest hours in Europe", "I've seen older generations work themselves to the bone and suffer health problems.", "...low earners deserve not just a higher minimum wage, but more control over the work they do." This frame acknowledges the power imbalance between workers and employers. It broadly falls into two categories: first the more traditional language that comes from unions and collective action that is about standing up to this power imbalance e.g. 'protection', 'standing up to', 'fighting back against' etc; and second a growing wave of people, especially on social media and in the media, talking about the exploitative elements of work they are personally experiencing e.g. around asking for time off, behaviour of bad bosses or things they believe unacceptable in their workplace.

The reset that many people experienced in their relationship to work during the pandemic seems to have led to more examples in the second category and emphasises a generational divide on the language being used around work. Media interest around the so-called 'Great Resignation' and 'quiet quitting' focuses on the behaviour of younger people in the job market. It belies a new awareness of the potential power of employees, but one that uses different language than that preferred by the more traditional union movement. 'Quiet quitting' has generated swathes of social media posts and articles treating it as a new phenomenon, when unions would identify it as the time-honoured tactic of 'work to rule'. It's worth progressive communicators and unions

looking at how we can better connect to those who are finding new language for old problems.

Language that helps employees realise their power is a positive thing, but it remains a work-based way for people to talk about improvement in their lives. The most powerful stories I found were those where work took a backseat and people talked of setting non-negotiable boundaries in order to have more time for other important things in their lives.

Beyond the language being used, how and when we talk about work is an important part of how people understand and come to form opinions around the issue. In politics and the media, work is often discussed when talking about lack of work. This is one of the main ways in which moral language has been cemented in mainstream discourse and the right has been able to use work as an issue to divide. Between 2010 and 2016, leading up to the Brexit referendum, this was heavily



We all know there's more to life than work



centred on migrants either 'taking' British jobs or choosing not to work and living off social security. Post-Brexit this died away in mainstream debate but is now on the rise again and you can find plenty of dog-whistle moral language subtly peppered throughout the speeches and broadcast appearances of many politicians.

While sifting through the language used during this period (2010-2016) I saw how both the right and progressives used the language of 'strivers', outlining an ideal morally-superior character who worked hard for a better life. When most people hear words like 'strivers' their minds will hear the echo of 'skivers' or 'scroungers' (in the US the equivalent was 'makers and takers'). Politicians themselves never explicitly pitted 'strivers' against 'skivers' they just trusted that we would fill in the blank. The caricatures of 'skivers' and 'scroungers' mirror what politicians have actually said, creating a scaffolding in our minds that light up networks in our brain

- making connections and cementing our feelings about those who were failing to 'do the right thing'.

This shows how important even the broadest brush strokes are when it comes to work. The way people feel about work and their own roles in their success or struggles impacts their views on things beyond jobs, social security, re-training, or even education. It impacts how people view the economy and their role in it, what they see as fair or unfair and what, ultimately, they will be persuaded to vote for.

We are swimming in messaging about work, from the prime minister's speeches to quirky motivational posters in gift shops. But progressives don't have their own scaffolding to talk about work in a way that will change the judgements and decisions people make, and ultimately lead us to meaningful change. Progressives piggy-back on the metaphors and frames which are already used by the right, which makes it harder to counter their arguments. Progressives rely on moral language, amplify their opponents' arguments, and use passive language, which makes the situations we are in sound like naturally or accidentally occurring things that no person, no party, and no company has a hand in.

In reality, work, while important, is just a small part of our lives. And this view is becoming increasingly popular, particularly among younger people. If we talk to people about their lives just through the narrow lens of work, we will struggle to connect with the other things people value: love, leisure, and rest.

We all know that there is more to life than work. The disruption of the pandemic and the sheer scale of the cost of living scandal has presented progressives with an opportunity to shift people's assumptions around work away from themes of individual responsibility and toward the rules and structures of our economy. We have a chance to change how people feel about work forever. So, if not now, then when?

Sofie Jenkinson is head of communications and news at the New Economics Foundation

FURTHER READING

From the Sutton Trust: Elites in the UK: Pulling Away? (2020) <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Pulling-Away-1.pdf>

From the Guardian: Ready to quit your job? Come and join me in the anti-work movement (2021) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/27/quit-your-job-join-anti-work-movement-elle-hunt>

From PwC: Workforce Survey 2022 <https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/press-releases/pwc-workforce-survey-20221.html>

SCROUNGERS AND STRIVERS OR SYSTEMS AND SOLUTIONS



As the soaring cost of energy, petrol and groceries continues to bite, how we talk about poverty will be more important than ever. Tamsyn Hyatt argues that our challenge is not to convince people that the system is broken, but to tell a story about how it can – and should – be fixed

Well, that went rather well." So tweeted food poverty campaigner Jack Munroe, after their viral social media campaign succeeded in pressuring Asda to stock its budget ranges in all stores. A few weeks earlier, Munroe's Vimes Boots Index – designed to shine a light on how much the price of value brand products had increased over the last few months – prompted the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to admit that "one inflation rate does not fit all." The ONS then pledged to update its cost of living and inflation figures to reflect a wider range of income and circumstance.

This didn't happen by accident.

Only a few years earlier, George Osborne asked us to think of fairness for the shift-worker, looking up at his neighbour "sleeping off a life on benefits." And Channel 4's Benefit Street, spotlighting lives on "one of Britain's most benefit-dependent streets," was met with comments like "Set fire to [it]" and "Should just terminate all the scroungers."

This dominant narrative, one of 'strivers versus scroungers,' has started to be replaced with a new story: one that reflects the reality of poverty. How it happens. And our urgent need to solve it.

The target of our collective outrage – what's seen as unacceptable and abnormal in British society – has begun to shift. Away from individuals trapped in poverty. And towards the systems and conditions that can trap us in poverty in the first place.

So how did this happen?

A relentless focus on context.

Over the last few years, from advocacy to film to relationship-building, campaigners have told a 'systems story.' By shining a light

on the systems and conditions that aren't working, campaigners have made it harder to dismiss poverty as an issue of laziness or poor choices.

This, too, didn't happen by accident. Over two years, FrameWorks UK and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation carried out research with thousands of people across the UK to understand how we can tell this new story. And – as we face the worst cost of living crisis in living memory – it's a story we need to keep telling.

This story has four important features:

First, it puts individuals in context. When we name the systems and conditions that shape lives and decision-making, we show that change means fixing those systems and conditions. Without this, people default to solutions that help individuals – like food parcels and night shelters – but do little to address social problems at scale.

Jack Munroe, for example, focused on our shared experience of prices and produce. What wasn't working for one became a problem for all – with a solution we all had a stake in.

Second, this story explains how our economy pushes people into poverty – and what can pull us out. When we explain how people are affected by external forces, it's harder to blame individuals. Without explanation, people often default to 'this is just how things are' and 'people just need to work harder.' We become vulnerable to misinformation to help fill in the blanks.

In September 2021, 100 anti-poverty organisations called on the Government to #KeepTheLifeline of £20-a-week higher universal credit payments during the pandemic. One month later, at the autumn budget, Rishi Sunak announced changes to universal credit that amounted to an annual investment of £2-3bn.

Third, this story shows how systems are designed. People tend to think deterministically about the way the world works, especially things that seem abstract or complex – like industries and our economy. We can override this by talking about how systems are made by design – and so can be redesigned to work for all of us.

In 2020, Marcus Rashford called out a system that "isn't built for families like mine to succeed." Combined with his calls to rebuild state support for families, Rashford's story helped secure two vital government u-turns on child poverty.

Finally, this story focuses on solutions. One of the biggest challenges we face when talking about social issues is fatalism: the idea that problems are too big or too complex to solve. And when all we hear is the language of crisis, it's not surprising that people step back and disengage. We need to focus on what can change – and how we can change it. We need to pair problems with our ability to put things right.

Our challenge now is not to convince people that the system is broken, but to tell a story about how it can – and should – be fixed. It's not to convince people that ending poverty is desirable. It's that ending poverty is now possible.

Tamsyn Hyatt is principal communications strategist at FrameWorks UK, the UK-based sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute

FURTHER READING

From the FrameWorks Institute: How to talk about poverty in the United Kingdom (2018). <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/how-to-talk-about-poverty-in-the-united-kingdom>

From the FrameWorks Institute: Talking about poverty to solve poverty (2020). <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/article/reframing-in-action-talking-about-poverty-to-solve-poverty-in-the-uk>

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