

Narrating the economy

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What is the story of the economy in Britain? Who gets to shape public opinion about what it's for, how it's broken and how it can be fixed? And how can progressive forces tell a new story to help accelerate the shift to a new economic system?

These are the questions the Framing the Economy project – a partnership between the New Economy Organisers' Network, the Public Interest Research Centre, the Frameworks Institute and the New Economics Foundation – set out to answer. We wanted to help civil society communicate and organise more effectively, to help bring about the changes needed to move to a sustainable, equitable and democratic economy.

Shifting sands – the context we're working in

The dominant story told about the UK economy, and the politics of that story, have changed repeatedly in the past three years. From 2010-2015, the defining story of British politics – the one that gave many progressives a rude awakening to the power of narrative – was the austerity story. The airwaves were full of politicians repeating that we had maxed out the nation's credit card and needed to stop borrowing; that the Labour government had spent too much and crashed the economy; that without drastic cuts to public spending, the UK could end up like Greece.

This story was remarkably resilient - against sluggish economic performance and failure on its own deficit reduction measures; against the reasoned argu-

ments of Keynesian commentators; against the anger of anti-cuts campaigners. It not only reinforced austerity politics but crowded out space to talk about real threats to our economy, like climate change. It spread the feeling that sustainability and social justice were luxuries the UK could no longer afford.

At the same time, George Lakoff's book *Don't Think of an Elephant!*¹ was popularising the idea that the way we frame issues radically shapes the way people think about them. Many on the left became increasingly convinced that our tactics needed a radical rethink – that trying to combat a simple and powerful story with facts, statistics, myth-busters and appeals to fairness was doomed to fail. As one senior press officer put it to us, 'We brought a spreadsheet to a knife fight.' More fundamentally, many began to suspect that our efforts to rebut the austerity story were actually reinforcing its boundaries – that we were playing into the hands of our opponents, and urgently needed to tell a new story of our own. It was against this backdrop that *Framing the Economy* was conceived.

In the years since then, British politics has been turned upside down. Over the past two years, the meetings of the *Framing the Economy* Network – a group of 40 top progressive communicators and campaigners who have been part of the project – have sometimes felt like group therapy. Brexit, Theresa May becoming Prime Minister, Trump becoming President, the shock 2017 election results – each of our meetings seemed to be accompanied by a new political earthquake. It was easy to feel bewildered, politically jet-lagged, struggling to remould our assumptions around an ever-changing reality. But it was also a huge privilege to be able to navigate this increasingly unpredictable world with such an impressive, committed and diverse group of people.

In 2016, a new story took hold of the public debate: the Brexit story. The Leave campaign insisted that the UK needed to 'take back control' from distant elites in Brussels, that our economy would thrive if only we could make our own decisions. This proved an immensely powerful story for millions of people who felt ignored and disenfranchised. (Though of course, many comfortably-off people in the south east and elsewhere also voted for Leave.) But of course, the Brexit story is not only a story about elites, but about outsiders of all kinds: it has gone hand in hand with the demonization of migrants and a terrifying rise in racism and xenophobia.

In 2017, we saw a glimpse of what could happen if the British people were offered a more positive story about our collective future. Against virtually all expert predictions, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party came to the brink of power with a message of ending austerity, rebuilding the public sphere and reclaiming common ownership of resources like energy and the railways. Ideas which had been taboo for a generation were suddenly back on the political agenda.

It is not only the content of these stories that has shifted the context we are working in, but also the way they have taken hold. During the Brexit campaign, economic experts lined up to warn of dire consequences to the UK economy if we voted to leave the EU. This was not only ineffective, but even seems to have strengthened the anti-establishment credentials of the Leave campaign. This challenges the widely-held assumption that the austerity story was powerful partly because it was presented as the expert economic consensus. Meanwhile, the 2017 election demonstrated the power of both grassroots organising and social media to mobilise people and upend the political consensus. The mainstream media may have been telling one story, but people's votes told quite another.

This forces us to think again about what it means to shift the narrative, and to be much more imaginative about the channels through which we try and do this. This is challenging, but also exciting: if the battlefield is indeed shifting from the difficult terrain of the elite media discourse to Labour's more natural territory of the doorstep (and – hopefully a strength for Labour – the Facebook page), this surely presents a huge opportunity for the left to fight on stronger ground.

Understanding how people think

To navigate these shifting sands successfully, we need to give ourselves a firm foundation. Beneath the tumult and upheaval, what are the shared assumptions – the durable 'cultural models' – that organise and shape people's thinking about the economy? Which of these can be leveraged productively to support new thinking, and which do we need to avoid or counter? We investigated this via 40 interviews with a demographically diverse sample of people from across the UK.

The cognitive hole

The first and perhaps most striking finding was how few models people have available to help them think about the economy. The economy is intimidating. Most people struggled to answer questions about how they thought the economy worked, and the models they did draw on provided only the sketchiest accounts of the actual *mechanisms* that structure economic outcomes. This is unsurprising: previous research has found that only around a third of British people feel comfortable engaging with economics,² only 17% think they have a good understanding of how big businesses work,³ and most could not accurately define key economic concepts like GDP⁴ and the deficit.⁵

This ‘cognitive hole’ presents a challenge for progressive communicators, but also an opportunity. The challenge is that our communications about the economy have a very thin base to build on: there’s a lot of work to do if we want to help people join the dots between different economic issues and progressive solutions, and feel empowered to act. Just think of the housing crisis as an example: how can we translate the complex problems of financialisation, privatisation and rent extraction into a story that points towards real solutions, that rejects the simplistic mantras of ‘build more homes’ or ‘stop housing immigrants’, but that is empowering rather than overwhelming?

The opportunity lies in the fact that we aren’t up against a solid, well-constructed neoliberal account of the economy that people draw on consistently to explain why things work the way they do. People may have internalised aspects of neoliberal ideology – such as the idea that people are inherently greedy, that the economy is synonymous with money, or that competition is inevitable, all of which came through strongly in our interviews – but these are piecemeal and sporadic: they do not add up to a coherent model of how the economy works that needs to be dismantled. (Again, this chimes with the findings of previous polling that the British public never fully bought into the dogma of privatisation, with large majorities consistently favouring public ownership.)

At one level, this may mean that progressives can cut through the public debate and begin to shift its terms with relatively straightforward and simple frames. But the deeper prize here goes beyond communications itself. Through grass-roots public education initiatives, integrated with campaigns, political

movements and community projects, we can begin to empower people so that they *do* feel the economy is something they have the right to an opinion on, something they are confident talking about, and not just an intimidating black box that only experts can understand.

Who's pulling the strings?

In some cases, this 'cognitive hole' was linked to a belief that the economy is simply a force of nature that cannot really be understood or controlled – rather than a system constructed by humans that can be rebuilt by humans. As one focus group participant put it, 'You can't redesign something that wasn't designed in the first place.' But our interviews also revealed a powerful and consistent sense that 'the system is rigged': that the economy works the way it does because powerful elites have structured it to serve their interests. Many on the left would argue that this instinct is essentially accurate – that reshaping the economy around the interests of economic elites has been at the heart of the neoliberal project, from deregulating the banks to enabling landlords to exploit tenants. Perhaps tapping into this instinctive understanding could provide a starting point for a compelling story about what needs to change.

The problem is that, without a clear understanding of *how* and *why* this has happened, this model is much less useful for the left than we might assume. Firstly, it tended to lead people to focus on the actions of 'bad apples' rather than on how the system needs to change – on nefarious individuals rather than broken structures. Second, the idea that these elites have almost complete control over what happens made people deeply fatalistic about the possibility of changing the economy. When asked about how the economy could be different, most of our interviewees found it almost impossible to imagine alternatives. While this no doubt reflects the left's failure to develop and articulate alternatives, it is also a logical result of the dominant cultural models at play.

Finally, people tended to conflate economic elites with political elites – so rather than seeing democratic control as a way of curtailing elite power, government potentially becomes part of the problem. (It's worth noting that interviewees consistently felt that government was responsible for solving economic prob-

lems – they just may not trust it to do so.) As one interviewee put it: ‘I think politicians forget that we live on one planet and it’s all about their own greed. I think the economy is set by men in suits basically and they will always profit from it, and profit enormously.’

The success of right-wing populists like Nigel Farage at co-opting anti-elitist rhetoric for regressive ends has left many progressives bewildered and angry. But on this evidence, perhaps we should not be so surprised. To build a compelling case for change, we need to do more than simply stoke people’s anger at elites. We need to situate this within a wider story that explains *how* this has come to pass and how, by acting together, we can build something different and better.

Telling new stories

In the second phase of our work, *Framing the Economy* set out to find the building blocks of such a story. We used a range of methods including ‘on-the-street’ interviews (think vox pop with framing), focus groups and a large-scale survey experiment (6,600 respondents) to test how different values, metaphors and examples affected people’s thinking about the economy. Our outcome measures included support for progressive economic policies, but also things like who people blamed for economic problems, how far they thought of the economy as the product of human design, and how optimistic they felt that the economy could be improved by our collective efforts.

In doing this, we had in mind a very live debate between two different types of story: what I think of as the ‘take back control’ story and the ‘all of us first’ story. The ‘take back control’ story is exemplified by Jeremy Corbyn’s left populist relaunch, under the retro slogan ‘for the many, not the few’. Corbyn’s recent face-off with Morgan Stanley – ‘when they say we’re a threat, they’re right. We’re a threat to a damaging and failed system that’s rigged for the few’ – is perhaps the purest expression of this story in action.⁶ The thinking behind this story is that the anti-establishment rage being harnessed by the far-right is something that properly belongs to the left – that taking on elites is our job, and only by credibly promising to do it can we successfully take on right-wing

populism. This sometimes goes along with an argument that only by pointing the finger at a new ‘enemy’ can we deflect the blame currently being directed at immigrants and benefit claimants.

The ‘all of us first’ story is exemplified by the work of Common Weal to build a positive progressive vision for Scotland. Their manifesto for change characterises neoliberalism as ‘me-first politics’ and contrasts this with a politics that puts ‘all of us first’. Advocates of this story argue that countering neoliberalism with a populist story that pits ‘us’ against ‘them’ is like trying to fight fire with fire. It’s only by telling stories that unify, that testify to our ability to achieve more by working together than we can by fighting each other, that we can hope to overturn a neoliberal story that emphasises competition and individualism. We should focus on the world we want to build and the lives we want to lead, not the people we want to take on. Some also worry that stoking a politics of blame will ultimately exacerbate racism and xenophobia rather than deflecting it: after all, history shows that hating economic elites and hating immigrants are far from mutually exclusive.

What our research suggests is that both of these stories can be effective – although only when used in certain ways, and probably not at the same time.

The populist story: taking back control

Let’s take the first story – which we’ve characterised in our recommendations as ‘the populist story’. Our survey experiment found that messages which combined an explanation of how neoliberal policy has empowered elites with the values of equality (elite capture is making our economy unequal when it should be fair to everyone) or economic strength (elite capture is undermining the strength of our economy so it doesn’t work well) produced a significant rise in support for a range of progressive policies. The value of economic strength seemed particularly effective at shifting attitudes among Conservative voters.

Separately, we tested a metaphor of ‘reprogramming the economy’, comparing the economy to a computer program to which elites have gained the password, so ordinary people are ‘locked out’. This significantly enhanced people’s perception that the economy was designed by people, that we could and should act together to redesign it, and that policy had a role to play in shaping these

outcomes. Given that people tend to see the economy as a ‘black box’, metaphors are useful because they invite comparison with something more familiar – demystifying the economy and providing a frame for thinking about how it works. We think that combining these various ‘frame elements’ into a coherent story about how we can redistribute power away from elites has real potential to open up new ways of thinking about the economy, without inadvertently reinforcing fatalism or anti-government sentiment.

The common ground story: all of us first

The second story, which we’ve characterised as the ‘common ground’ story, is built on the value of fulfilment. We found that engaging this value also significantly boosted support for progressive policy, but that it behaved in the opposite way to the values of equality and economic strength. Where the latter two values only seemed to be effective when coupled with a story about elite capture, fulfilment was only effective when *not* coupled with this story. We think this is because these two frames reflect two different types of argument. Where the populist story is essentially a story about power – who has it, why this is bad and how it needs to be redistributed – the common ground story is essentially a story about priorities. It argues that the economy isn’t meeting our real needs – *anyone’s* real needs; that we need to look not only at how money is distributed but also at what we want that money *for*. We think this story taps into a deep sense that our society has the wrong priorities: that things like community, safety and time to enjoy life are more important than chasing growth and profits.

With this story, we recommend using a metaphor that compares the economy to a network of railway tracks. This metaphor can be used in a variety of ways – to talk about how the economy isn’t taking us to the places we really want to go, or about how we’ve built tracks that are only serving some parts of the country while leaving others stranded. The key thing is that people built the tracks and people can remake them to better serve our needs. Like the ‘reprogramming’ metaphor, we found that this significantly boosted people’s sense that the economy was designed and could be redesigned. However, it lends itself less to talking about imbalances of power and more to talking about the ‘destination’: the needs which economic activity should help everyone up and down the country to fulfil.

With everything we tested, we were careful to avoid language that could play into a narrow or exclusive concept of the British nation, and found no evidence that these messages encouraged people to blame immigrants or those at the bottom for economic problems (though it's worth noting that we also didn't find compelling evidence they made this *less* likely, as some have suggested).

What next?

Of course, this is far from the end of the story. We have already begun work with campaigners on different single issues, from housing to deregulation, to explore how these general findings might apply to their work – and we hope to do much more. We also have plans to shift focus from building a compelling story to building the infrastructure the left needs to tell that story well – from training our press officers to sharing best practice and latest research. And doing this work has left us more convinced than ever that efforts to shift the narrative must fill not just a communications gap, but an intellectual gap and an organising gap. We need new ideas, new solutions and new ways of making them a reality just as much as we need new messages.

These are times of great possibility and also of great danger. For the first time in decades, there is a sense that the economic consensus is fracturing, that a change must and will come. A space has opened up to talk and think differently about the economy. The question is what this space will be filled by: a narrow, nationalistic story which scapegoats outsiders, or a positive vision for a just and sustainable future? It is imperative that civil society rises to the challenge. We hope that Framing the Economy provides a solid foundation for this vital task – but the real work is only just beginning.

For those wishing to learn more either about the findings or about methodology, the full report of the Framing the Economy project is available at <http://neweconomyorganisers.org/our-work/framing-the-economy/>.

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Notes

- 1 G.Lakoff, *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*, London: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.
- 2 YouGov / Post Crash Economics Society, 2015, https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/1hodojy30j/PostCrashEconomicsSocietyResults_150128_economics_W.pdf.
- 3 Populus, 2015, 'The Multiple Faces of Corporate Reputation', http://s3.amazonaws.com/wavecast-production/wavecast-platform/sites/277/2015/07/The-Multiple-Faces-of-Corporate-Reputation-Report_28.07.15.pdf.
- 4 YouGov / Rethinking Economics, 2015.
- 5 YouGov / Sun on Sunday, 2015, https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/2rm330ydgM/SOS_Results_150115_Website.pdf.
- 6 R.Mason, 'Jeremy Corbyn tells Morgan Stanley, You're right, we are a threat', *Guardian*, 30.11.17, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/nov/30/jeremy-corbyn-morgan-stanley-labour-brexit>.

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