Feeling political? Turbulent emotions in the age of Starmer and Reform UK

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Is it possible to imagine an 'emotionally intelligent' progressive politics?

What can we understand about the current political conjuncture in the UK through the lens of 'feelings'? In academia (across cultural studies, sociology and politics, for example), the prism of emotion and affect has generated many useful insights and perspectives, alongside a lot of arcane articles devoted to ambiguity and ambivalence.[1] In particular, an attention to affective experience moves beyond reductive ideas of politics as explained primarily through crude self-interest or overly rationalist accounts of shared ideologies. Grappling with feelings opens up the space for a more complex and theoretically nuanced approach to political solidarity and its absences - to the ways in which people get 'sucked in' or 'swept up' or feel left out of the broader 'intensities' shaping a given conjunctural moment.[2] In this article, we focus on 'political feelings' as a way into understanding the difficulties and possibilities of the present.

If you ask people on the left, 'how are you feeling about politics at the moment?', for many, probably the majority, the answer is negative: a stew of depression, depletion, disappointment and despair. Meanwhile, the right is busy trying to

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re-route these related feelings of anger, abandonment, fear and disillusion into its proto-fascist circuits of power - and too often appears to be succeeding. For others on the left, things have simply become so bad that they are now actually on the way up again - or out the other side - as people prepare or search for alternatives through which to organise, including by decamping to the Green Party or joining the Corbyn/Sultana Your Party.

In this article, we trace some dominant threads of current 'political feelings' through three sections. The first outlines the emotional depletion and disillusionment further cultivated by Starmerism on the back of the structural neglect of the last neoliberal half-century. The second section traces the emotional re-routings and political-libidinal rewirings of such feelings by the radical right, and in particular by the Reform UK Party, around 'flashpoint' topics like local government and migration. And the third considers nascent stirrings: the feelings of progressive change and the ways in which they are being, and might be, nourished. Ultimately we ask: what might an 'emotionally intelligent' progressive politics need to think about today?

Starmerism, authoritarian centrism and depletion

Much has been written about the affective politics that is fuelling the radical right and new authoritarian-populisms around the world today, from Trump in the US to the growing constellation of anti-migrant ethnonationalisms in Europe. As Wendy Brown points out, this is a politics grounded in a sense of aggrieved power - especially white male power - in the wake of neoliberalism's undermining of middle-class security, alongside working-class subsistence, and its hollowing out of public infrastructure.[3] Authoritarian leaders today mobilise and feed these affective currents of resentment, rage, bellicosity and grievance, as well as the associated pleasures of dominion and cruelty. (See, for instance, the recent forays of UK far-right activists to Calais, where they film themselves intimidating and harassing asylum seekers.) The payoffs for their populaces are overwhelmingly psychic and libidinal, rather than material. Leaders like Trump and Farage aren't pushing policies that will actually improve the fortunes of those working and middle classes; but they do offer to humiliate the 'threatening' Others (immigrants, Black people, asylum seekers, trans women, Muslims, the 'Guardian-reading, tofu-eating wokerati', etc) perceived to be monopolising the resources, jobs, housing and freedoms imagined to be the rightful

(and exclusive) inheritance of the 'native' population (aka the 'Real People').[4]

Less understood or commented on, however, is what the long denouement of neoliberalism and its privatisations has meant for the affective politics of the liberal centre and the left. For many on the centre left in the UK, Labour's return to power in summer 2024 promised a break from a decade-plus of Conservative-led austerity. Yet Starmer's electoral victory was not buoyed by a widespread sense of optimism or energy: rather, it was a 'loveless landslide'.[5] Starmer's Labour won fewer votes overall than the Corbyn-led party in the 2017 election. And only ten weeks after Starmer took over at No 10, public polling showed that this enthusiasm gap had quickly turned into a deep-seated sense of disappointment among Labour voters, as the party that governed was increasingly revealed not to be the party that progressives had hoped they were electing.[6] From unpopular cuts to winter fuel payments to the refusal to raise taxes on wealth and corporations, from the government's timidity over Gaza to its increasingly strident rhetoric and policy against migrants of all kinds, the 'new Labour' government is less interested in solving the crises that austerity has produced than in managing their popular fall-out by tacking to the right., adopting authoritarian policies while advertising Britain as 'open for business' to tech and finance capital.[7] Today, the question for the political commentariat is not if Starmer is deposed from within the Labour Party, but when - and whether someone from the centre left or the right will replace him.

Labour's approach has, predictably, left many people in its traditional base disheartened and disillusioned. Even those who did not have high expectations of a Starmer government, following his previous breaking of so many of the promises he made when running to lead the party, have been disappointed by the stark and cruel choices that this government has made so far: its unwillingness to take on corporate power, to work with Labour's progressive wing, or to challenge the narrative frames of the radical right. Many knew that Starmer offered a technocratic managerialism in place of a left-populist project, but they didn't expect such blithe unconcern for all those constituencies that capital considers unproductive and therefore undeserving. As even *The Guardian* noted, 'A Labour party in power might have been expected to defend the poorest and most vulnerable in society. No longer, it seems'.[8] Many Labour voters didn't expect a government that would betray the poor, the sick, the disabled and the elderly; that would sacrifice the environment to private property developers; that would abandon the trans community; that would build new prisons

and abandon the jury system; and that would justify those policies on the basis of 'taking hard choices' and 'fiscal responsibility', when they wouldn't entertain the possibility of making the wealthy pay their fair share. In lieu of holding to principled commitments or developing a shared political vision, Starmerism has so far governed by focus group, an approach that displaces the citizen as an active participant in acts of collective self-rule and replaces it with the citizen as a consumer, whose 'preferences' or 'values' are already set and cannot be subjected to scrutiny, challenge, or revision. Or, as Wendy Brown puts it in her wider discussion of neoliberal managerialism: 'As both individual and state become projects of management rather than rule, as an economic framing and economic ends replace political ones, a range of concerns become subsumed to the project of capital enhancement, recede altogether, or are radically transformed as they are "economised".'[9] True to this logic, Starmer's Labour sees its task as 'delivering' for 'working' people, not as leading or collaborating with them; and for so many, it has not even done that work of delivery, turning instead to what Will Leggett calls, in this issue, 'a politics of nothing', so as not to rattle the bond markets.

This deep disappointment with Labour providing 'more of the same' as the last neoliberal half-century is entrenching an affective politics of frustration, alienation and powerlessness for many on the centre left (and beyond). Liberal democracy is no longer wearing any clothes. Its electoral apparatus promises a source of popular control that is continually denied and disavowed by its unaccountable and unfair outcomes.[10] After the systemic dismantling and excommunication of the Corbyn project, there appears to be no real progressive alternative; as one commentator put it on a Reddit thread, 'parliamentary politics is a wasteland'. Collectively, there is a sinking feeling - amplified and circulated by the media's rabid coverage of Reform's council wins and Tory MP defections - that the political horizon is shaped by the slow slide to a Farage victory. For many on the centre left, the crisis of liberal democracy has also fractured its own certainties, its faith in the tectonics of good governance and the liberal norms of civility, pluralism and equality.[11] Many centrists (in both the US and in the UK) are adrift on a sea that they do not understand, as the old anchor points of liberal democracy no longer provide reliable guides to political action.

The British left, by contrast, has largely seen this coming - its Cassandras have prophesied the rightward shift since Brexit, if not before. The left's electoral

quiescence today speaks less to the affective impasse of liberal disillusionment than to the repressive tactics of Starmer's party management, which expunged the Corbyn project from the parliamentary field and 'made antagonising the left into its apparent *raison d'etre*';[12] and to the decades-long hollowing out of the institutions that provided foundations for left politics, from trade unions to community centres. Tory governments' crackdown on protest and dissenting politics has also limited the left's room for manoeuvre on the streets, a process which Starmer's 'authoritarian centrism' has escalated - its most conspicuous example being proscribing Palestine Action as a 'terrorist organisation', an act condemned by the UN human rights chief.[13] The left's disjuncture from organised electoral politics has been turbocharged by this demolition of the infrastructure of agonistic social democracy.

Affectively speaking, the UK today seems caught up in an antipolitics of disavowal and retreat, as the disillusioned and depleted increasingly turn their focus to the privatised realm of personal and family matters. The cost-of-living crisis, of course, underwrites and has made such a turn materially necessary for many people, where the time tax of being involved in sustained political organising is not possible. Or, as Shirin Rai argues, we can speak of depletion whenever 'the outflow of social reproductive labour exceeds the inflow of resources, tipping those affected over the threshold of sustainability' - and removing them politically from the field of struggle.[14] This withdrawal from the political also betrays a form of 'cruel optimism', as members of advantaged and privileged groups turn their attention to shoring up their own financial circumstances and providing for their families' futures.[15] In the wake of decades of social depletion, destruction and disinvestment, the private sphere has become reconfigured as the only site of politics - but politics understood as personal acts of self-interest and virtue performance rather than as the collective work of co-creating socialised infrastructure for all, imagining and extending vibrant and liveable alternatives, and organising to hold those in power to account.

Robots, re-routings, Reform … and local government

Starmer's government, then, promised 'change' via *competence*. The technocratic manager is not supposed to have feelings or be swayed by those of others: a calm bureaucratic rationality is an important component of what is supposed to make them seem 'grown up' and 'in charge'. Starmer positioned himself early on as the sensible achiever who could actually 'get things done', in contrast to what was

retrospectively framed as a fantastic Corbynite pipedream. And yet this government has not delivered any significant progressive change. Instead, it has offered relentless authoritarian centrism, genuflection to the worst of corporations and to the Trump administration, and only the smallest of union-forced gestures to economic and social justice - all whilst chasing the bandwagon of right-wing populism and allowing it to set the agenda. In the process, Starmerism has scored spectacular own goals with regressive and unpopular policies: most notoriously in scrapping the winter fuel allowance for pensioners and proposing to 'reform' welfare by cutting benefits for some of the most vulnerable; but also by increasing NI contributions (which raised costs for the public sector and small businesses), rather than implementing a wealth tax or seeking to recoup profits from banks that had reaped huge windfalls from quantitative easing. At the same time, the government pursued an all too familiar programme of authoritarian centralisation - from the reform of policing, through changes to the justice system, to the sustained assaults of protest and protestors.

In the process, Starmer's 'new Labour' has failed to engage with, much less articulate, the maelstrom of political feelings around it. In key respects, it has managed to exacerbate these feelings - by promoting policies that fail to address inequality, offering changes so minimal so as to barely register, or, most frustratingly, pushing policies that have made these disparities worse. Rather than address the systemic causes of the neoliberal crises that have eroded many people's standards of living and privatised social infrastructure, the Starmer government is instead in the business of 'managing' the symptoms and contradictions of the crisis - often taking its lead from London's financial sector. It has presented as 'more of the same', and as largely offering a continuity of pain. In this context, what the Labour Party leadership initially presented as 'technocratic grown-up competence' now looks more like a robotic lack of feeling. Not for nothing has Starmer been compared to the 1980s computer Max Headroom.[16] Labour's promises of competence have rung hollow. Instead, most of its senior figures present as unfeeling and uncaring, merely in it for the power and the perks. Indeed, Morgan McSweeney, until recently Starmer's chief of staff and a key architect of Labour's rightward swing, pointed out this 'deficit of emotion' to Cabinet in January 2026 - though the fix he recommended was to channel 'three Es, emotion, empathy, and evidence' rather than changing direction.[17]

What channels are available for these widespread feelings of abandonment, frustration and devaluation? Into this affective and political vacuum has stepped Reform UK, which has won many of its local seats by speaking to people's sense of political betrayal and their everyday loss of power. Reform's manifesto is passionate, snappy and clear. It offers clear and emotive lines about how we are 'worse off, both financially and culturally', telling us the previous parties 'have broken promise after promise'. 'They have destroyed trust in our democracy and betrayed the British people'.[18] On the ground, in local election battles, Reform has tended not to lead with its manifesto policy of excluding more children from school. Instead, what is voiced most emphatically are emotive generalisations about broad-brush issues, which are gradually but systematically articulated to reactionary policies. The issue most recently mobilised by Reform - and notably, the least responded to by Labour, nor indeed explored in depth by journalists or political analysts - has been the strategic flashpoint of local government spending and competence. 'Britain is broken', we hear, repeated again and again.[19]

There has been extensive discussion of how much Reform's political appeal owes to Farage's claims to represent a home-grown, anti-migrant common sense, while in fact massaging and accelerating it. But it is also necessary to be alert to local government's role as a key area into which resentment at injustice is re-routed by the populist right - in part because the left has failed to provide either the necessary story about what has happened or the policies to address its funding crisis. In the UK local elections in May 2025, Reform UK won the most votes, the most council seats and overall control of most local councils.[20] Key to Farage's pitch was the argument that his party would seek to 'reduce excessive expenditure' in local government, in part by suggesting that his councillors 'would scale back local diversity and climate policies'.[21] Reform has repeatedly reiterated this claim that local government overspend is a key problem - one with no significant basis in fact - whilst gesturing towards what are positioned as the apparently high costs of progressive policies on inclusion, and the environment.[22] DEI policies that spend money on 'lean-in' feminism or diversity agendas without addressing the economic dimension of gendered and racialised oppression are easy targets for public ire, not least because they are part of a trend that has traded a commitment to substantive equality for self-improvement rhetoric. In turn, the lack of clarity around affordable access to green services (such as heat pumps) has helped feed a narrative around the supposed 'expense' of net zero - a narrative which Reform, with its fossil-fuel

backers, is desperately trying to promote. Farage's approach clearly echoes the populist far-right reaction in the US and beyond to efforts to combat sexism and racism and to promote environmentalism: it trades in an 'anti-equality agenda' which frames any departure from fossil fuels or the dominance of rich white men in public life as unrealistic, unfair and expensive. This is, by now, a familiar chain of equivalence.

So too is the charge that government is 'wasteful', a neoliberal clarion call since the 1980s which has repeatedly sought to frame public spending - whether local or national - as 'waste', in favour of facilitating the profits and power of corporate capital. The difference today is the sheer scale of the attack, which clearly echoes Elon Musk's savage DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) cuts to necessary public services in the US; Reform UK has introduced identically named 'DOGE units'. In reality, Musk's 'efficiencies exercise' failed to deliver the billions of dollars of savings promised and instead caused chaos - as well as lost lives - by shifting the country firmly towards authoritarian capitalist proto-fascism.[23] The preposterous idea that the most significant problem with local government is that it fritters away taxpayer money has been allowed to gain traction - to gain discursive wings and fly - largely because there is simply so rarely any mention of the fact that, in the UK, central government funding for local government was slashed by 55 per cent in the decade between 2010 and 2020.[24] Council funding has been cut to the bone, yet today this goes largely unmentioned in the news or in public political debate. Starmer's Labour has not provided a convincing narrative (or indeed any narrative) to explain this issue to a public which has been getting poorer, which pays more in taxes, and which has seen its surroundings and public infrastructure deteriorate. In the absence of political stories that account for where this money has gone, images of bankrupt councils and Birmingham's overflowing bins are free to swirl around as uncontested evidence for a Reform narrative.

Another reason for such political feelings about 'waste' in local spending gaining traction is the widespread, everyday, demotic understanding of money having been redistributed in recent decades in ways it shouldn't be, in ways which haven't been socially useful to the majority. Yet there is no widely disseminated or available popular story that accounts for or contests this perceived maldistribution. The key problem over the past half century has been 'trickle-up economics': the ballooning wealth of billionaires in our neoliberal, asset-based economy; the widening, yawning

gap in economic inequality between the rich and the rest.[25] Indeed, there *has* been a waste of public sector money, in that so much of it has been siphoned off to corporations through neoliberal practices of contracting out public services, through privatisation and PFI - all of which are practices that Reform wants to extend. But this mortgaging of public assets has not been addressed by a Labour government that has loosened regulation of the financial sector and invited BlackRock to tea.[26]

The paradox at the heart of this dynamic is a profound disjuncture between the official celebration of the UK as the 'sixth largest economy of the world', or more colloquially as one of the 'richest countries in the world', and the popular experience of deepening inequality, austerity and recession.[27] Most people do not feel as though they are living in a rich country. In the absence of a clear political narrative against billionaires, marketisation and trickle-up economics, the political and emotional ground is all too readily available for a re-routing and re-wiring of everyday discontent, and for the mobilisation of incipient political passions to the right. Reform UK wants to exacerbate inequality rather than address it, but has adopted a populist language in which it represents itself as being 'anti-politics' – as on the side of the people and common sense. Such an exercise in 'giving voice' to the people is, of course, highly selective. Only certain communities are envisioned as properly deserving - and only certain losses can be understood as redressable. Whilst last June's spending review did see Labour giving slightly more money to local government, there has been no loud condemnation of the previous regime's cuts, though they have forced some councils into bankruptcy.[28] Nor is there a trumpeting about the value of increased spending in this area. Equally missing in action is any vociferous condemnation of Reform and its 'policy' proposals - let alone a critique of the excesses of capitalism. Without political feelings that show it cares *and* proof of that care through progressive policy, Labour allows disaffection, anger and exhaustion to grow, and these feelings are then selectively interpreted and mobilised through what Stuart Hall called the 'popular ventriloquist voices of the radical Right'.[29]

The stirrings?

What, then, of the possibilities for politics to come? One of the challenges confronting progressive politics today is how to understand - and respond to - this affective landscape. The left - always diverse, and now increasingly split across a number of political parties and organisational nodes - needs to make sense of

the different dispositions currently in play, without collapsing them into some over-generalised idea of 'anger' or 'frustration', since these emotions contain (and may conceal) important political and sociological differences. In exploring these questions, we have found it useful to return to an analytical approach developed by Raymond Williams for what he called 'authentic historical analysis' - namely, mapping the distinction between dominant, residual and emergent formations.[30]

Some *residual* political feelings persist, notably those desiring a return to 'sensible' or 'reasonable' politics after the psychodramas of recent Conservative governments. Some of these sentiments are fuelled by residual social-democratic attachments, and by aspirations for a more coherent and just society. Such desires for 'sensibilism' hoped to find a response in Starmer's managerialist Labourism - as evidenced in the relief that many people experienced after the Tory loss in 2024. But more recently increasing numbers have turned away from this position in frustration - towards the Greens, the nascent (and troubled) Your Party, and to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats, while others have had their scepticism about politics and politicians confirmed.

There are certainly some *dominant* public moods that are centred on frustration, anger, despair and a sense of abandonment. These negative affects have been well documented and form a foundation for either a withdrawal from politics or an inclination to populist anti-politics. As we have indicated, Reform has done much to capture such moods, treating them as if they are coherent and consistent indicators of a public ready to embrace xenophobic nationalism in lieu of a broader redistributive project. Yet these feelings are neither singular in their source nor stable in their meaning. A progressive politics needs to find ways of understanding and addressing some of these feelings of anger, frustration and despair - not least the feelings emerging from the proliferating problems of the Starmer government and its inability to respond to so many popular discontents. As Jeff Maskovsky and Sophie Bjork-James have argued, 'angry politics' are not the exclusive property of the right; as they note, the 'disaffection between the promise of prosperity and the reality of precarity can serve as a political resource for various forms of politics'.[31] Reform's political ascendency, riding a wave of grievance, is by no means preordained or guaranteed. Instead, we would stress the multiple disaffections, emerging in different forms from different sites, that could and should be addressed. In the search for alternative ways to address such disaffections, we may begin to assemble the

elements for building a new progressive politics.

What, then, about the *emergent* - the third and most elusive element of Williams's trinity? How do we see, and make sense of, different sorts of 'stirrings', or the traces of emergent 'structures of feeling' (Williams, again) that might be taking shape? [32] There are other focal points for anger, despair, disaffection and energy beyond the mainstream and national-populist versions of politics, not least of which has been the profound outrage that has fuelled the regular pro-Palestine mobilisations. This is a complex anger that links a global politics of anticolonial solidarity with domestic resistance to Islamophobia, and that is revulsed by the Starmer government's complicity with Israel's genocide in Palestine and subsequent quietism about US imperial adventuring in Venezuela and Greenland. These feelings notably fed into the early popularity of the Sultana/Corbyn party project, before in-fighting and financial mismanagement limited its political development.

A different cluster of frustrations and desires, in turn, is helping to drive the persistent, if still inchoate, rise of green politics, as Labour has rolled back from many of its promises on achieving net zero and mitigating the worst of the climate catastrophe. It is worth noting that while much media sensationalism has been devoted to young men's political alienation (and their tendency to shift to the right), the growing politicisation of young women and their engagement with left and Green political issues has received much less attention.[33] At the time of writing, within this volatile landscape, most energy appears to be consolidating around newly visible left-green alliances, as manifest in Zack Polanski's steering of the Green Party, which yokes green politics to attacks on billionaires and Reform's anti-migrant scapegoating.

Multiple feelings of frustration and rage have also centred on questions of work and worth, as the conditions of waged work continue to deteriorate. Stalled wages and precarious contracts in the face of cost-of-living crises have fed into the continuing renewal of trade unionism, especially, but not only, in public services. These developments raise new questions about generational changes in activism, not least where they touch on wider concerns about the hollowing out of the public realm and infrastructure deficits (e.g. union action that seeks to defend both the wage levels of staff and the service in which they work, such as the NHS or universities). Such concerns intersect with deepening popular frustrations about the failures of Starmer's Labour to 'do the right thing' about poverty, inequality, public

spending and failing public services, and there is particular concern about those which have been outsourced or sold off for profit. Such sentiments have been visible in a range of civil society and local mobilisations, particularly in relation to the water companies - including activism by groups such as *Surfers against Sewage*, the rise of 'citizen scientists' and demands for action on water quality. Proliferating campaigns against the dissolution and corruption of the public realm serve as further examples of the popular fury about the state of the UK and its moral standing (e.g. over aid budget cuts, student loan scandals and the government's full-throated support for environmentally costly AI developments).

All this is a reminder of how, crucially, the 'local' remains a salient site of affective political investments - and not just in the most visible cases of what have been called the 'left behind' places. The local today is the setting for a range of hybrid activisms - social, communal, collective, prefigurative - that are not always understood as 'political'. As Akwugo Emejulu has pointed out, what is taken as 'political activism' often tends to fetishise dramatic media stunts in the public sphere, but we need to have a more broad and capacious understanding, which also includes collective activity in playgrounds, blocks of flats and communities.[34] These resistant practices often seem to operate below and beyond the systems of formal politics.

Three concluding puzzles

Finally, we explore three questions that emerge from these issues. They concern the possibilities which these emergent affective clusters represent for the renewal of progressive politics.

First, what 'structures of feeling' are emerging as resources for a progressive politics that might not look like 'politics' as we know it? Is this a moment when we should no longer feel obliged to the existing institutions of expression, mobilisation and capture? Are we (once again) trying to overcome the paradoxes and limits of parliamentary socialism/social democracy/labourism? When looking for what is stirring, we might want to consider whether the emergent political looks like politics as we know it. As Jonathan Dean remarked in his critique of narratives that stress the apolitical condition, perhaps we should try 'to foster ways of seeing that are open to acknowledging and grappling with the potential strangeness and peculiarity of present and past forms of activism, in ways that might resist their domestication into established histories and frames of reference'.[35] The political movements that shape

the left to come may not arrive in a guise we recognise, but that doesn't mean they won't promise better alternatives to the authoritarian-centrism that has set itself up as the 'sensible solution'.

Second, from this standpoint, the rise of Reform offers both an urgent warning and a political paradox: what are the likely implications of this politics of frustration? In particular, what if Reform - in a Trump-like fashion - doesn't deliver and fails to resolve those frustrations? Does it drive a greater scepticism about and retreat from politics, intensifying the mood of feeling *apolitical*? Or does the resulting distrust about 'politicians' as a class fuel the desire for a 'strong leader' instead? Both are worrying prospects. How can the present and future failures of the radical right provide the terrain for alternative diagnoses and mobilisations, rather than a return to centrism?

Finally, we need to ask how well equipped 'the left' is for finding ways of enabling, connecting with and mobilising such diverse disaffections, whether within formal electoral politics or outside of it. 'The left' has never been a consistent entity, of course, but it is particularly splintered and fractured at present, after being purged in such numbers from the Labour Party and now existing in a disparate range of spaces and places. These lefts need to find ways to boost each other and strategise together, to interconnect and defeat the right. Do we have - and how can we build - the capacity to *articulate* such structures of feeling into emergent political formations? Here we use articulation in Hall's sense of simultaneously expressing and connecting, or what Kipfer and Hart call the Gramscian work of translation.[36] What stories might we tell about where we are today? What hopes and desires might we mobilise as the bases for new ways of acting together? How can we move our feelings into a wide range of strategies and actions that build a better political place to live?

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