FEATURED CONVERSATION

The left (still) doesn't understand the internet

Jack Jeffrey and Alan Finlayson

In June 2025, Nigel Farage boasted on Facebook and X that he had more TikTok subscribers than all other 649 MPs combined – 1.3 million and rising. Most Labour MPs, including every cabinet minister, lack any presence on TikTok. This matters. Online is now the dominant space where people engage with political news, commentary and values. Traditional media is often consumed online, reframed through clips, shares, and posts. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram are not just campaign tools – they shape how people think about politics. The next election won't be fought online alone, but its terms will be set there. Labour's digital absence risks ceding the ideological battleground. Here, Renewal Editor Jack Jeffrey speaks with Professor Alan Finlayson to explore why all of this matters, and what the left can do about it.

Jack Jeffrey (JJ): One of my favourite books is Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. It details the remarkable ecosystem that flourished among ordinary people in 19th century: public libraries, and union-sponsored reading rooms provided access to books and periodicals; formal and informal educational groups offered structured learning opportunities; newspapers, journals, and pamphlets disseminated not just political ideas but also literary and cultural content. These institutions fostered debate, discussion, and collective learning. And they didn't just improve individual lives. They created the conditions for collective political action and helped lay the groundwork for the labour movement.

That infrastructure, as many people have pointed out, has atrophied on the left. Today's left is dominated by professionalised parties, think-tanks, and NGOs, increasingly struggling to operate effectively in a landscape dominated by the internet. Everyone seems desperately lost. But the right, or more specifically the online radical right, do not seem lost. The internet has enabled them to build alternative ecosystems outside of traditional institutions which replicate that 19th-century left infrastructure and provide people with a way to access ideas, worldviews, and explanations. I don't think most people, especially people over a certain age, realise what's happening. The right now occupy a dominant position online because they've been experimenting in these spaces in a way that the left simply hasn't.

I should emphasise that I'm not really talking about the usual personalities that provoke boomer hysteria – i.e. Andrew Tate or Tommy Robinson. All of this isn't really about getting in the headlines but about the long-haul of showing people, especially young people, how to think and act. It is all part of a movement that understands how ideas travel. The left doesn't get this. They still think we're living in this idealised Habermasian public sphere where we're all engaged in rational debate.

Alan Finlayson (AF): I appreciate a lot of what you say there. Labour in the 19th and 20th centuries was more than just a vote-catching machine, to use Schumpeter's phrase. It was a civil society institution – part of an embedded form of life. Crucially, it understood that one of its roles was political education: members could learn how to host a meeting, speak in public, run a campaign. Through party booklets and pamphlets they could better understand capitalism, social history, alternative political possibilities – and how to work to realise them.

In October 1987, Labour stopped producing *Labour Weekly* – a paper for members that included policy discussion, interviews, commentary. That shift symbolises Labour's final and full embrace of broadcast-media-focused, and centralised campaigning. Peter Mandelson, coming from London Weekend Television,

shaped Labour into a party focused on news cycles, TV strategy, and polling. The educational function of the party faded, and – fuelled by the deep sectarianism of the Party in the 1980s – suspicion of members grew. A new model of party politics – organised around tight management, message discipline, news control – defined the Blair era and shaped a generation's understanding of what politics *is*. There were perfectly rational reasons for adopting it. But that model is now broken. We don't live in a broadcast media world and centralised organisations are sluggish in our fast-moving political culture.

In the early days of online culture the established political parties thought of it as way of extending the reach of retail political messaging and of conducting new kinds of market research. They assimilated it to their existing paradigm and didn't see that the paradigm had shifted. What they missed above all was that digital platforms enabled people to recreate that lost world of party newspapers, speeches and meetings that you just talked about. Contrary to what a lot of people who work for legacy media seem to think people do not go online for a simple affirmation of their political identity (and there is no empirical evidence to show that any significant number are locked in 'echo chambers'). People go online looking for ways of understanding what on earth is going on in the world, for deeper explanations and interpretations than those they find across the broadcast media, and for richer longer-term analysis.

And they get answers from YouTubers, podcasters and a million online commentators. In that context the political force of traditional media rapidly dissipates. We're now in a world where political education – how people come to learn about political issues, political processes, what politics is and how to do it – takes place on and through online platforms. The online right understands this and they have moved decisively to occupy that political-intellectual high ground. The left is only now starting to climb the hill. And Labour is in the valleys somewhere, probably on a different continent.

JJ: I would add that much of the liberal left tends to focus on corrupted or subverted information flows – as if the problem with today's politics is just a matter of misinformation. It reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the current moment. Particularly for young people there are real drivers behind the appeal of the online right: economic precarity is one, social atomisation is another. These dynamics are pushing people to search for explanations and the online right is offering them answers. Now, I do think the left also has answers, but it hasn't, for the most part, figured out how to communicate them effectively in this online terrain. And that's a serious problem.

AF: I think framing it within that broader context is helpful. Because the standard model goes something like this: social media is full of lies and disinformation pushed by bad actors and evil tech firms. That's not entirely untrue. That defi-

nitely happens. But it's only a part of the picture. The idea that people are simply duped or manipulated by clever algorithms – that online politics can be reduced to dopamine hits and emotional manipulation – is, in a way, comforting. But that ignores, on the one hand, the fact that politics always involves emotional investment. The Labour Party, for example, is a deeply emotional project for many of its members. And on the other hand, it misses the political and economic context – as you say the experiences of real material insecurity and social disconnection which people want to understand and do something about. There's a tremendous hunger for answers to that question of 'What is going on? Why is the world like this now?'; the older media and political movements are simply not answering that question.

When it comes to younger people, there's a long cultural history here of course. Post-WW2 popular and youth culture was particularly characterised by stylised rebellion against conformity, consumerism, and alienation: beatniks, hippies, punks, the rave generation. All these cultural movements sought forms of collective life and of meaningful experience beyond mass consumer society. Today we live amidst the commodification of almost everything: nature, education, social relationships. And we live in a world of plenty, of incredible riches, which is also characterised – especially for younger people – by intense precarity and uncertainty: student debt, poor job prospects, unaffordable housing, the climate crisis, war. A core part of our experience today is what I call the "occlusion of the future." It's hard for most of us to picture how we might live in the future, and a secure path to get there: how and where we will work, raise a family, buy a home, or even survive.

In earlier periods that might have sparked radical youth cultures in physical spaces. Today, it manifests online. And many figures in the online right proudly frame themselves as inheritors of countercultural traditions: anti-consumerist, anti-mainstream offering an alternative to alienation. Paul Joseph Watson, for example – a prominent UK based YouTuber and radical right political activist who gets millions of viewers – has explicitly cast himself as today's punk, as part of today's counter-culture, railing against the vulgarity of commercial pop culture, the decadence of high art and the emptiness of modern life. That's an alienation the left used to speak to but now it is spun in a reactionary direction and instead of underpinning a political claim about overcoming and improving on our current malaise it is the basis of a call for the destruction of societies committed to liberalism and egalitarianism.

In this respect, online reactionary political culture offers three things: a sympathetic articulation of lived experience, a sense of rebellion or challenge to orthodoxy, and a grand explanatory framework: it's all the fault of the liberals, the cultural Marxists, the feminists, the academics and so on. That can be presented in ways which make it a conspiracy theory of sorts but it also targets real

phenomena – the corrosive individualism of neoliberalism, the commodification that has substituted for culture, and the intrusive managerialism so many of us experience daily at work. And – very importantly – this reactionary politics gives people something to do, so that they feel they are able to exercise some power over their situation. It doesn't only say vote for this party, donate money to this cause. It also says read this book, attack this person online, go on this march – and tell all your friends and family.

JJ: To what extent do you think this online political engagement is really about audience-building and content creation, rather than actual political organising or policy development? For example, the Lotus Eaters network – a UK-based right-wing media outlet founded in 2020 by Carl Benjamin (also known as *Sargon of Akkad*, a former YouTuber and UKIP candidate) – is producing content nonstop: longform podcasts, TikTok, reaction videos. Yes, it's political, but it's also entertainment. It's media work. I wonder if I'm overstating how much of it is actually about conscious organising for political ends.

AF: That's an excellent question. I use the term *ideological entrepreneurs* to describe how the online world has opened up space for people to produce and circulate political ideas in radically new ways – and to get paid for them. That used to be only the case for political professionals, journalists and academics. Now the barriers to entry into 'the marketplace of ideas' are minimal: you no longer need a printing press, newspaper column, or university position. Anyone can start a Substack, launch a YouTube channel and build a Patreon following. Some people make hundreds of thousands a month that way. But – and this is crucially important – you don't need millions of followers. A dedicated few thousand willing to pay a small monthly fee can generate an income above the UK median wage. Doing relatively well through posting on TikTok in the evenings can be a nice supplement to a median income. The platforms encourage this. They share ad revenue, provide user analytics, and push creators to optimise content for engagement, whether it's politics, makeup tips, or pet care. The result is a massive expansion of markets for what was once niche political content.

Are these figures just opportunistic content producers who would pivot to other topics if it made them more money? Well, maybe sometimes. But I don't think this explains everything. Newspapers have always been commercial ventures. We can assume that staffers at *The Guardian* or *The Daily Mail* are intentionally producing commercially viable content, and that is an important influence on what they say. But we can't conclude that they don't have a real politics (or that the politics in those papers isn't real and consequential). For the reactionary right, 'the grift' is not in contradiction with the politics. It's part of the ideology. From their perspective, mainstream media, academic and political institutions have monopolised the ideological field: we've been told what to think by an established and institutionalised elite. So, outcompeting them in the open

market is both a tactic and a victory. 'Owning' the libs *and* winning followers is proof that your worldview is correct. It's not just 'content', it's ideological production, and the monetisation is seen as validation.

This also has profound consequences for how political content works. For most of our history liberals and socialists alike have conceived of political communication as taking a relatively clear form. Its genres are the speech, pamphlet, manifesto, essays and so on. That had to be adapted somewhat to broadcast media, with a focus on image and leadership, and it gave rise to new forms: the television interview, the party political broadcast, the election debate.

On digital platforms genres blur, blend and are invented anew. Political content online combines information, emotion, entertainment and advice with other genres of content. Sometimes political discourse is indistinguishable from self-help, lifestyle, humour or discussion about video games. The genres of political expression are being transformed. Skilled influencers have learned how to make political messaging which is informal and which can take numerous formats alongside fitness tips, dating advice, video reactions, memes.

This leads back to your question about whether this world is separate from organised politics. In one sense, yes. It's often not party-affiliated. It certainly isn't subordinated to elections (though it has been an important aspect of election campaigning by Trump in the US and Reform in the UK – for Meloni in Italy, Bardella in France and so on). But that's not its main strength.

The right-wing American publisher Andrew Breitbart famously said – and Steve Bannon still often repeats it – that "politics is downstream from culture". He meant that victory in elections and in legislatures required first winning in the culture war. Liberals, social democrats and the left ought to know this. Gramsci outlined the importance of the cultural terrain for political struggle from his prison cell in the 1930s. The feminist, gay rights and anti-racist movements of the 1960s and 1970s understood this: that is how they advanced to the point where legislation became inevitable. But mainstream parties have eschewed that kind of thinking and some on the left have even tried to deny that culture war is real, calling it a distraction. Meanwhile, the right have long been developing what the French called a 'Gramscianisme de droite,' a 'metapolitics' waging ideological battle against the nostrums of liberal thinking so as to prepare the ground for political advance. That metapolitics has involved more than challenging or attacking the content of political ideas, policies and programmes. It's also involved attacking the style of 'mainstream' politics and its forms of political thinking.

While the genres and subcultures of online politics feel detached from formal institutions, the former is preparing the ground for policy victory. Online content shifts norms and values. It primes people to accept a range of policies, because

they've been normalised through everyday, entertaining, informative and emotionally resonant content. Ultimately, what we're seeing isn't just online extremism or trolling. It's a broad ideological movement that uses the tools of digital capitalism – subscription models, social media engagement, parasocial relationships – to wage a cultural war against the idea and the practice of equality. It tells alienated people, young men, but also older people, women, people of all sorts of backgrounds who feel that they are struggling to get by or get on: "You feel worthless because 'they' want you to feel that way. But you're not. You're right. You're strong. You're better." That's deeply comforting, and when it's allied to an argument about who 'they' are, how to go and find out for yourself what it's all about and what to do to oppose it, it's politically powerful. Meanwhile, Labour is talking about 'missions', 'GDP' and 'growth strategies' while people feel worse and worse off. And – because it has no interest in the political education of its members, and because it thinks too many of them have the wrong politics, it isn't giving them the arguments and ideas to go out and explain and promote policy to their friends and family.

JJ: That's really useful. I think it's important also to emphasise just how much the new online right has displaced the mainstream right. This isn't total yet, but the intellectual momentum is clearly with the online right. If you talk to almost any young policy researcher or special adviser around the Conservative Party or Reform, they're more likely to reference anonymous bloggers and Twitter (X) posters, than mainstream right lodestars like Milton Friedman or F.A. Hayek.[1] The direction of travel is with them. This transformation has happened fast, though it's been a long time in the making. A lot of people are capitalising on that moment. Look at figures like Robert Jenrick who have absorbed the aesthetic and language of the 'YOOKAY' meme – a somewhat derogatory term for the modern United Kingdom, which mocks its multicultural identity. It paints the UK as a stagnant, 'grubby' dystopia, overflowing with immigration and inner-city chaos.

AF: That's exactly right. One of the big misunderstandings is that people still tend to think of political ideas as neatly aligned with parties or fixed ideologies, as if the Conservative Party is one thing, and then there's a far-right party over here, and then something like Reform sits somewhere in between.

Online dynamics completely break down those boundaries. It's no longer the case that, to encounter fascist or radical ideas, you have to cross town to a shady pub and talk with scary people you don't know. Now, those ideas are just a few clicks away. But at the same time, fascists and other radicals are exposed to a wider ideological field. And this is also transnational. People – be they regular voters or conservative party researchers – are getting ideas from Europe, the US, Canada and so on. Orchestrated campaigns against Critical Race Theory, started by think-tanks in the US and waged very effectively online, have reshaped the

language of politics in the UK. British right-wing and libertarian TikTokers talk about their ancient natural rights as if they are fighting the American War of Independence. One striking example is that what we in the UK call EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) is, in the US, called DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion). The latter term is replacing the former in UK political debate.

The point is that if we want to analyse our politics now, we can't just think in terms of a two-dimensional political spectrum – from very left to very right. On the right there is a porous, dynamic space where ideas, symbols, and concepts move fluidly across different groups and interests where they get picked up and deployed and then sent back out again. I and my colleagues write of Reactionary Digital Politics to name this broad milieu through which people move making use of what they find. That's not to say it's not fascist – some of it is – but that it is more fluid, more mobile and individualised in its use than the fixed ideology of a party. In some respects, it's more dangerous because anyone can pick up on these ideas and do their own entrepreneurial thing with them.

In contrast, the organised left, especially in parties like Labour, has drastically narrowed its intellectual scope. It's suspicious of radical or even mildly heterodox ideas, and as a result it struggles to articulate a compelling vision even to itself. The ideological bandwidth has shrunk, leaving it poorly equipped to compete on this new terrain.

JJ: That raises questions about political consciousness. What does it mean for young people to come into politics not through parties, unions, or newspapers, but through memes, symbols, fragments of discourse on platforms optimised for attention? What kind of political subject does that produce?

AF: That's a complicated question because it depends. Are we talking about people actively looking for political content, or those being drawn into it passively?

For previous generations like mine, a lot of anti-war and anti-nuclear sentiment came through music, fashion, and subcultures. Today, there's no national media culture anymore. There's no shared set of references, no mainstream and counterculture in the old sense. Instead, young people are entering politics through a totally fragmented digital landscape.

I think one thing for people to understand is how different 'the internet' is for a teenager today than it was for a teenager just 15 years ago. Because I am very old I still often open a browser on a computer and search for something. But most digital content is accessed through apps – TikTok, Reddit, YouTube – not "the internet" as we used to know it. And users aren't just browsing; they're being fed. And what they're fed is determined not by editorial judgment or journalistic ethics but by algorithms optimised for engagement. What's most outrageous,

emotional, and attention-grabbing. That content comes in torrents, unfiltered by traditional gatekeepers.

Something such as gaming, for example, is a huge part of our culture – far bigger and perhaps more culturally impactful than television though you would not know that from reading newspapers. Some of the best TV adaptations are of video games, not novels. Not only are games themselves sometimes politically or ethically complex, but watching others play (via platforms like Twitch) has become a major channel for political content too. People are learning political ideas from these spaces, developing digital literacy, learning who to trust, what to believe, and how to read the cues and references in this environment.

In a sense, we're seeing the evolution of a new form of political literacy. Many users don't just seek information; they look to influencers to help interpret what they're seeing. And digital spaces are full of internal debates – streamers arguing with each other, audiences choosing sides. You don't need to know who Destiny or Hasan Piker are to grasp the point: digital politics is driven not just by information, but by personality and performance. At the same time, much of what drives engagement is still recognisable. Real-world events like the war in Gaza, U.S. elections, or culture war flashpoints. But the distinction between "serious" political issues and culture war trivia is increasingly blurred. Complaints about Marvel movies having too many women now sit alongside commentary on major geopolitical conflicts (and the former can lead people into forming views on the latter).

JJ: That's exactly it. The internet isn't just a tool, as some older generations still think, it's a place. It's remarkable how these online spaces have built a visual and symbolic language – memes that tap into real anxieties, especially economic ones – without needing to explain anything in detail. It's meant to be intuitive.

Take the 'Nicholas (30 ans)' meme – a satirical infographic that emerged in France around April 2020 and later spread to the UK, US, Germany, and elsewhere.[2] Nick is a struggling 30-year-old man, with a good job. He should be happy, but according to the meme, he'll never be able to afford a house or receive a state pension because he's being taxed into oblivion to fund an overly generous welfare system, especially for immigrants, and an entitled ageing population. It's crude, but it's effective. It doesn't try to persuade – it creates an instinctive reaction, a gut-level sense of grievance. And that's where the right excels: they've managed to condense complex ideological narratives into single images or short videos.

AF: That's a really good observation, and I agree, though I'd add something to complicate it. A lot of people outside online culture still assume it's all memes and short videos, and I sometimes hear people say, 'We need more snappy YouTube clips,' as if that's the answer. But some of the most popular political content online is longform – three or four-hour podcasts or video essays – and

people *do* watch and listen to them. These longform arguments are embedded in a broader aesthetic and cultural style.

The *subcultural aesthetic dimension* of political expression online has taken on far more weight. That's partly to do with the shift from a print-based to a digitally networked literacy. A book is a closed artefact – it builds a self-contained argument. But online, content is hyperlinked, open-ended, referential. A meme gains meaning from being part of a larger subcultural formation, often opaque to outsiders. And sometimes that's the point – the meme isn't meant to be understood universally. It signals in-group status and excludes the uninitiated. The online right has been particularly good at weaponising that, often mocking digital outsiders (e.g. Gen Xers, and boomers) for not getting the joke.

Why can't the left meme? In theory, it should be good at it. Lenin wrote on the power of the slogan. "Peace, Land, Bread" was a meme before its time. The left has a tradition of slogans, banners, symbolic protest. But today, much of the liberal-left subculture is stuck in a kind of heritage mode. There's reverence for trade union banners and the iconography of the 20th-century labour movement, but little experimentation with the new visual vernaculars of digital politics. Maybe that's because the liberal left has long been dominated by a print culture, and with that has come a particular style of thinking: abstract, universal, moral concepts applied deductively to political phenomena. Fairness, justice, equality. These are treated as pre-existing standards against which the world is measured. Much of left argument today, even the "pragmatic" kind, follows that structure.

By contrast, right-wing digital discourse tends to work inductively. It starts with a specific case – someone fired for misgendering a colleague, a statue taken down, a controversial tweet – and builds from that to a broader ideological claim: the liberal elite is destroying civilisation. It's not rigorous, but it has a logic, it connects effects to causes, and it's emotionally effective. Memes work in the same way: they distil a particular emotional experience, suggest it's universal, and bypass the need for more detailed exposition. Ironically, this echoes what the left once did well – when it said: "Your personal experience of oppression isn't just yours, it's shared – it's political." That's now a move the right has learned to make far more deftly.

JJ: Before we move on to why the online right seems to outperform the left, I just want to raise one more thing: is there something inevitable about the so-called alt-right or far-right pipeline? As you said earlier, the algorithm rewards escalation, transgression, and outrage. Is it inevitable that young users are driven in this direction? Or is there space for intervention? Left politics isn't inherently mainstream. In fact, it can be radical and transgressive too – many left-wing ideas should, in theory, play well in these digital environments. Why aren't they?

AF: That's exactly the right question. One thing to keep in mind is that, while we've been talking about a very influential sphere, it's still a minority of people who are highly politically engaged online. Most people aren't immersed in this stuff. But it's also true that that minority drives much of the online political energy. The real question is: do we try to reach that minority and pull them in a different direction, or do we try to build an alternative that's visible enough for others to find when they go looking?

The first step, as you've said before, is infrastructure. The online right has been building theirs for decades, with ideological entrepreneurs supported and reinforced by a culture of mutual promotion: they appear on each other's podcasts, share audiences, and cross-link their platforms. There's solidarity between reactionaries. The left could do that too, but right now, too often, it fragments, criticises itself, and struggles to build aligned networks of support.

Second, there's the content itself. Does it have to be transgressive? Some figures on the so-called heterodox left who define themselves against liberal causes think so. But that doesn't offer much strategically. What's needed isn't just provocation for its own sake, but content that's interesting, entertaining, and rooted in analysis. Too many left commentators online just mimic mainstream punditry – sitting back, diagnosing events, but not offering frameworks for understanding or acting. What we need is content that explains how the world works and gives people opportunities for agency. And that requires a shift in form. If the left is still producing short videos aimed at driving policy awareness or encouraging votes, it's missing the point. This is a long game. It's about cultural transformation over time. The right has a ten-year head start. The left needs to stop playing catch-up in electoral cycles and start laying foundations for the future.

Then there's tone. A lot of centre-left or liberal-left material leans heavily on moral judgment. What's needed is explanatory content – how the economy works, where money comes from, how policy shapes lives – delivered in ways that are engaging, accessible, and strategic.

JJ: Yes. I think the right relate to ideas in a fundamentally different way than the left. The right see ideas less as badges or sticks and more as shared tools. And this is extremely important because this effects the type of content people want to engage with. The right have created spaces that feel strangely welcoming. Lots of left spaces feel cold and judgemental. For newcomers, engaging with the left can feel more like a scolding. Whereas the right is constantly trying to invite people in.

This speaks to another important point. These spaces aren't just ideological; they function as social worlds too. They offer friendship, connection, belonging. As you mentioned, there's real solidarity on the online right. People help each other out. That's true not just between creators, but among audiences too. Subscribe to

someone's Patreon and you're in a Discord server or message board where you're not just consuming content, you're making friends. You're finding people who see the world like you do. That's powerful. We know that Gen Z and millennials report having fewer close friends than previous generations. In a socially atomised world, offering people a sense of community, along with an explanation of why things feel broken, is an incredibly potent combination.

AF: It's easy to miss this dimension if you're not embedded in online culture. Many people still treat digital media like an upgraded version of the old broadcast model, where content is delivered in one direction. They don't recognise that YouTube, for example, is a form of *social* media, or that much of what circulates online is *participatory*. People also want to participate. The question is: how do we create spaces, online and offline, that allow for genuine discussion and engagement? This is where community organising methods – one-to-ones, small-group conversations – can be valuable. But it's also about what the left is offering intellectually. People want to be given reasons, frameworks, and explanations that help them make sense of the world.

JJ: Totally. That takes us neatly into the final section: strategies for the left online. In the end, I think what's really lacking is ideological confidence. If you look at the online right, what stands out is just how bold and unapologetic it is about its worldview. The left needs to find that again, and find ways to communicate it not just through policy PDFs, but through culture, explanation, and shared spaces of meaning.

Joshua Citarella talks about this in relation to why he launched Doomscroll – a podcast designed to counter the online right by exposing potential sympathisers to left-wing narratives.[3] The goal is to intervene in the attention economy by producing and inserting content into the algorithm that will direct young people towards distinctively social democratic analysis. This, crucially, means platforming lots of different guests. People from across the political spectrum, including people that might be considered off limits, but also, and this speaks to something you said earlier about serious political ideas existing alongside silly memes, internet personalities and celebrities. That kind of openness is essential.

AF: That kind of openness only works if its strategic. If you want to engage with the right, then have a strategy. It can't be about purity but you can't just provide content for someone else's political channel and income stream.

This takes us to a deeper issue: the collapse of analysis on much of the centre-left. Traditionally, the left was grounded in class analysis, or at least some structural account of how domination works – whether economic, racial, gendered, or otherwise. But the mainstream left in Britain largely abandoned that in the 1980s and never really replaced it. What we're left with now is a kind of

hollowed-out moralism, reluctant to challenge orthodox economic ideas or articulate a clear alternative. And that's a political dead-end. If you're invested in upholding the socioeconomic status quo, you're not going to appeal to the majority of people who are being failed by it (and you have no way to explain to them why it might get better).

Digital culture changes how people are politicised and how arguments are communicated. But it doesn't eliminate the need for analysis – of the economy, of power, of what's gone wrong and what might be done about it. Without that, the left has nothing to say, no matter how good its memes are. And unlike the right, we can't just fill that void with appeals to identity and nationalism. We see the complexity of the whole system, and that's a strength, but only if we can give people the tools to make sense of it for themselves.

JJ: I agree with this. But we also need to think seriously about influence in this online arena, and how that then translates into actual impact. The right, as we've already mentioned, is increasingly good at that. How does the left better connect online energy with offline action?

AF: That's a great question. My best answer is, we don't fully know what will work yet and that's okay. The right has been successful partly because it was willing to experiment – to see what landed and to adapt. There's no single blueprint. Different things will work for different audiences, and a lot of what succeeds won't begin as explicitly political content – it might be cultural, personal, aesthetic.

I'm too old to know what works for 20-year-olds, but that's fine. What matters is creating a culture that encourages experimentation, rather than shutting things down the moment they emerge. Too often, the left's first instinct is to critique or dismiss something for not being ideologically perfect, rather than letting it grow.

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Notes

1 For a similar phenomenon in and around the Republican Party, see Mana Afsari, 'Last Boys at the Beginning of History', https://thepointmag.com/, 22 January 2025.
2 Gus Carter, 'Meet the Zoomer Doomers: Britain's secret right-wing movement', www.spectator.co.uk/, 1 March 2025.
3 Joshua Citarella, 'A New Pipeline', https://joshuacitarella.substack.com/, 1 May 2025.