

Where are the next big ideas coming from?

Published: January 13, 2026, 12:20 pm

Two comment columns have caught my attention in the last couple of days. The first is a comment in an article from an author for whom I do not always have much time. She is Anne McElvoy editor of the Economist, [who in a comment piece for the Guardian](#) said:

Instability is built into this ragged new politics of spasms and twitches. “How cross are you?” is an easy question to pose. “What do you propose doing about it?” much harder. Where is the great Corbynite thinktank, pumping out big ideas?

The [second was the swan song column](#) of [John Van Reenen](#) as Director of the LSE's [Centre for Economic Performance](#). In this he said (amongst much else worth reading):

It would certainly be a great thing if more academic economists [were involved in talking to the public](#). Basic fallacies like thinking there is a fixed number of jobs, so immigration (and population growth for that matter) must be bad for unemployment are rampant. So more public engagement would certainly help. More support must be given to colleagues who help spread the economic news as there is a clear cost in time spent on public engagement versus time spent on other academic activities — research, teaching and admin.

I see the two pieces as related. As someone who has been engaged in a think tank way on the left and who is one of the few people to be credited with creating ideas for Corbyn I am acutely aware of the lack of others apparently doing the same thing. As someone who expects to be more engaged in academia in the future I wholeheartedly support John Van Reenan's view. But I would argue they are saying the same thing.

There is a crisis of confidence in elites, which is Anne McElvoy's main argument.

And the apparent contempt of those who are now the political elite for anything that looks like thinking is Van Reenan's theme.

But when the elite are both contemptuous of thinking and at the same time control the funding that permits what little professional thinking in subjects such as economics take place aren't we by definition at a point where crisis is inevitable? The greatest

reward for the academic has, for too long, been supplied by reinforcing the elites' view of itself. Maybe that was always the case. But when that view now disparages thinking what is left? Isn't it that this is the moment when the left has to take the risk of reclaiming intellectual innovation for social purposes?

In the last fifteen years I have seen too little of that. Tax justice, the living wage and the Green New Deal can mark up some successes. What else can, really?

Anne McElvoy is right: where are the think tanks on the left? Why is so much effort expended for so little output that I see making an impact?

And why are professional academics so loath to take part, even if they are on the left?

The need for new thinking has never been so great. But where is it coming from? To put it another way, what is the next tax justice that can become so obvious an idea that it has to be embraced? It's not obvious as yet. And I wish it was.