

People, politics and despair

Published: January 12, 2026, 11:25 pm

Young people, most especially, are struggling to find reasons for hope in the world neoliberal politics has created, and who can blame them?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLCNwTlgFrY?si=OTPszcid1X6aYDdr>

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=vdugt-1899d94-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

People, politics and despair are three topics that have crashed into my thinking over the last few days.

I actually took a weekend off last week, which is quite unusual for me and went away, but I didn't stop thinking because, for me, that's something that just does not happen. And I was having a coffee quite early one morning over that weekend, in Chichester, where I was staying in West Sussex, and I was having a conversation with the barista.

The barista in question was a young man, I guess around 28-ish, but we never even got as far as swapping names. But the conversation was fascinating because he asked what I did and we talked about that, and we talked about political economy, and he said

things which are so typical of people in the UK right now, and most especially younger people in the UK right now.

Here was a clearly intelligent man. There was absolutely no shadow of a doubt about that. Everything he said indicated that. He was a graduate. The discussion implied he was, and I'm sure that was true. But he has stopped listening to the news in the UK.

He can't face news about Trump, which is so dystopian that he just feels as though it is oppressing his well-being.

He can't also face listening to the news because he had hope that last summer we might get a new government that might change something in the UK, and he now realises that isn't going to happen.

He is literally despairing of the political process, both domestically and internationally. It is as if everything has been pulled away from him. He is left in despair because the politicians have given him nothing to believe in, and for that reason, he's effectively giving up on them.

And of course, he's not alone. It's typical of young people that they feel this way.

They feel that they have no hope.

No hope of a house.

No hope of a decent job, let alone a well-paid job.

No hope of the opportunity to, therefore, create and provide for a family.

No chance to use their skills, those that they trained for at university and for which they created a very large debt that now hangs like a millstone around their neck.

No chance to think, to create, to add value to the world, which they did want to believe in, but are wondering whether they can.

They actually feel as though the tax rate is too high as well. They are deeply disincentivised by the financial situation, which this government, amongst others in the past, has put in front of them, because just look at that tax rate.

20% income tax.

8% national insurance.

10% student tax, which is effectively what repayment of student debt involves.

A 5% pension charge, which as this young man put it to me, is all about, in fact, him having to pay now for the old age pension he might get, because, somewhere down the

line, he does not believe any government is going to keep up its commitment, which I'm enjoying, of a state old age pension.

In total, , he's going to be paying, if he ever gets near a salary big enough to almost live independently of his parents, a combined tax rate of 43% on the margin, something which is more than the tax rate actually paid by those earning between £50,000 and £100,000 in the UK and only a tiny little bit less than those earning over £150,000 in the UK.

Everything is stacked against that young man.

And then just to add to the mix, there's AI, which is just removing his hope, particularly as a creative person.

How long will it be before whatever it is that he wants to create will be done by a machine instead, at lower cost, by people who are only interested in maximising profit and who aren't really interested in creativity at all?

Of course, he's despairing of politics. Why wouldn't he be? All the odds are stacked up. So what does he do instead? What I read into what he told me was this: he looks for the next dopamine hit.

We didn't discuss where that came from, although clearly we were looking at coffee and cakes, so maybe that was it.

But what he is also looking for, and a lot of young people might look for, is alcohol. Or illicit substances or sex or whatever else your poison might be, but in every case, the desire is for a dopamine hit in the short term, and that's because in the political situation in which we're living, people have given up on the long term. They can't see the chance for a house, a family, a reason to invest, a reason to create the skills for their long-term career, because they don't see there being a long-term career.

In fact, they don't really see anything much in the future because that is what neoliberal politics and neoliberal economics is offering them. A future without hope.

We've created a population that doesn't believe in government.

As a result, it doesn't believe in the future.

As a result, it hasn't even got high expectations of tomorrow.

It will simply get the hit it needs tonight, and we are, as a consequence, keeping young people in a sense of perpetual youth.

We are not letting them grow up.

We are not letting them take on the responsibilities of adulthood because we aren't entrusting them with the opportunity to take the risk on those things that once were the signs of that happening - the independence that was the key factor in that equation.

And yet neoliberalism is premised on the fact that we need these people.

The hopes of the far right politicians who want to ensure that we do not have migration into the country are also premised on the belief that we must keep people in the UK in this situation, doing jobs that are frankly unrewarding to a degree that is staggering, especially given the scale of qualification that people doing them have.

This is the world that neoliberalism has created.

It's desperate.

The politicians who've created this need to look at themselves and realise how badly they have failed this country.

And the populists who think that they have an answer need to look as well, because what they're talking about is keeping people in this situation, and that really worries me.

We need a politics that cares, and that's the last thing that we've got now.