

Why do politicians really attack “woke” ideas?

Published: February 17, 2026, 7:02 am

“Woke” once meant awareness of injustice. Now it is used to mock compassion. This video explains how culture-war language protects wealth and power, and why reclaiming the language of care matters for democracy and economic justice.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRd6GLC_p5c?si=oxp522Pp-OXGXQ6s

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=k3t8r-1a4908f-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

At the Munich Security Conference held last weekend, European Union Foreign Policy Chief Kaja Kallas rejected the ideology behind US Secretary of State *Marco* Rubio's speech. She said, "Contrary to what some may say, woke, decadent Europe is not facing civilisational erasure." She was right. Europe is 'woke'; that makes it a civilised place to live. We need to talk about that word woke.

People keep using the word woke as if it is a term of abuse. I want to make clear in this video, it is not. It's a term that is wholly appropriate and one to which people should aspire, but those who attack it want to hide something in the way that they use it. They want to use the politics of distraction by changing language to subvert meaning and so

distort power. That's why I want to talk about this word woke, and what it really does in politics, and why understanding that matters.

Let's be clear what woke originally meant when the word emerged in its current meaning. Woke meant being:

- * alert to injustice,
- * alert to racism,
- * alert to exploitation,
- * alert to inequality.

It was about awareness of power. It was, in other words, all about political economy.

What has happened to the word since then? The right and much of the media have tried to change its meaning. They now say, woke means

- * caring about inequality,
- * caring about minorities,
- * caring about the environment,
- * caring about things like social security,
- * caring about the truth.

In other words, woke now means, in their opinion, caring about other people, and that's why they attack it. You could not come up with something more absurd than that.

These attacks on the word woke matter because language shapes policy. If care is being mocked and if justice is being ridiculed, whilst equality is being sneered at, then policies of care are made politically impossible, and that is exactly what neoliberalism, or the politics of destruction, as I like to call it, wants to happen.

That politics of destruction is designed:

- * To undermine trust.
- * To undermine public services.
- * To undermine social security.
- * To undermine truth.

And then those who promote it say that the government has failed, and use that as an excuse to cut services even more or privatise them. The attack on woke is part of that

process. Never doubt it. This is all about politics, and it's the politics of hate that they're promoting, which is, of course, the exact opposite of the politics of care.

Their aim is to create the economics of failure. If you want to justify inequality, you must, first of all, delegitimise concerns about inequality, and of course, woke is an expression of concern about inequality.

And if you want to privatise health, education, housing, or pensions, you must mock compassion, and of course, woke is a word about compassion.

Calling people woke is then a way of doing just that. It is propaganda designed to normalise injustice.

And there is a real issue of power here. Who benefits from the attack on woke after all? Billionaires, rentiers, tax avoiders, those who want weak states, and those who profit from division, which most far-right politicians do. The attack on woke is a culture war designed to distract from class war, and there is a class war going on here. It's a class war by the wealthy on the rest of us.

Economists should care and worry about this because the word woke is now used to block debate about fair taxation, wealth inequality, climate policy, labour rights, social security, and public investment. Language is being used to stop democratic discussion and accountability. That makes this a real issue in political economy, which is, you should recall, always about how power is used to allocate resources. Woke is a word used by the hierarchies of power to try to prevent resources being allocated to those who need them.

The consequence is that when caring is mocked, we get:

- * underfunded health services,
- * collapsing local government,
- * housing crises,
- * insecure work,
- * declining life chances, and
- * anger and division.

And then, as history has shown, the politics of fear and hate follow: this is how societies slide towards authoritarianism. That is why the attack on woke matters so much.

So we need to reclaim the word woke. So what should we do?

Firstly, refuse the insult.

Secondly, use the word.

Thirdly, explain what it means.

Fourthly, talk about care openly.

Being woke in its real sense is simply recognising injustice and trying to fix it. That is what democracy requires. That is why we must reclaim this word for our use and deny its use to those who would attack it.

The politics of hope is something that I talk about on Funding the Future. I talk about the economics of hope as well. Hope means investing in people, maintaining human social and environmental capital, whilst funding public services and tackling inequality, and strengthening democracy. That agenda will always be called woke by those who fear it. That tells you something really important; they don't care. I do. I think you do too.

So let me conclude, woke is not an insult; it's about awareness. The attack on woke is a political strategy to undermine that awareness of inequality and prejudice. It is designed to protect wealth and power. It does so by undermining democracy. If we want a politics of care where we care for everyone, then we must defend the right to use the word woke. We must defend the right to care in itself. That means defending the truth about our economy and the right to use language that properly describes it.

What can we do?

- * Challenge the misuse of language.
- * Use woke if we want to.
- * Explain how government really works.
- * Demand fair taxation.
- * Support strong public services.
- * Promote the politics of care, because economics should be about well-being and not profit.

So, if someone calls you "woke," ask them which injustice they want you to ignore. Because that is what being anti-woke, as these people are, requires. What is it that they want to turn a blind eye to? And why, in other words, don't they care when you do?

What do you think? There's a poll down below.

Poll

[poll id="326"]