

## Are we going backwards?

Published: April 8, 2026, 6:09 am

---

What happens when reason stops mattering in politics? We are living through the answer in real time. For 45 years, neoliberalism has been the dominant force in Western democracies, and in that time, it has done something far more dangerous than redistribute wealth upwards. It has systematically dismantled the intellectual and ethical foundations that make democratic politics possible.

The Enlightenment gave us something extraordinary: the idea that reason, evidence, and the equal moral worth of every human being should guide how we organise society. Neoliberalism replaced that with markets. It reduced people from moral equals to economic actors, stripped public services in the name of efficiency, weakened democratic accountability, and narrowed the boundaries of political thought until Margaret Thatcher's "There Is No Alternative" became conventional wisdom rather than a political choice.

The consequences are now impossible to ignore. Careful reasoning is being replaced by crude slogans. Evidence is losing ground to belief. Nuanced debate has given way to hostility. And the backlash against neoliberalism's failures is not producing a return to Enlightenment values; it is producing the conditions for fascism: demands for loyalty over accountability, indifference to consequences, and the deliberate promotion of inequality for the benefit of an elite.

Thomas Hobbes warned us centuries ago about what happens when the social order breaks down. We are approaching that point. But as this video argues, the current path is not inevitable. Change is possible, but it requires us to recommit to evidence-based decision-making, rebuild democratic institutions, constrain markets, and put care, not profit, at the centre of politics. Can we do that still? That is the question.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKldbhCt5Hc?si=TmwnMUVn88aZ0mTc>

This is the audio version:

[https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=84snd-1a91721-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo\\_link=episode\\_page&btn-skin=c73a3a](https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=84snd-1a91721-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:

---

Are we going backwards in how we think about the world? That's a question that is troubling me right now. It feels like something is unravelling in our public life. We have Donald Trump talking about 'stone age solutions' for Iran, and that should worry us because this is not just about one man threatening another nation. It is part of a wider shift.

The question is whether our thinking itself is regressing at this moment, whether we are going backwards, as his comment implies, and that's the issue I want to explore in this video.

What I want to do is unwrap two ideas. One is the idea of the Enlightenment, which started in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, and neoliberal thinking, which has been the dominant strand of thought in Western democracies over the last 45 years. We often treat these things as if they're the same or linked, but they are not.

The Enlightenment was an intellectual project that shaped the West and its structures, and the other is an economic doctrine; mixing them up hides what has gone wrong. So, we need to separate them and be very clear about this. That's where my argument begins.

When the Enlightenment began in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was an attempt to reshape how we think, quite deliberately designed to do so, in fact. It said we should use reason and evidence to form our judgments, whereas previously we'd used faith and fear as the basis of decision-making. It challenged the unquestioned authority of the world at that time, whether that be in the form of monarchs, or churches, or whatever, and it argued that people have equal moral worth. That was a staggering change in the way in which thinking took place.

Now, I admit there were problems with this. Women weren't considered to be equal to men, despite the fact that the Enlightenment was taking place, and of course, slavery developed during this period. So let's not pretend that the Enlightenment thinkers were that enlightened. But there was something that did change as a result of what they had

to say about people being of equal moral worth, and we can see it in things like the US Constitution, for example. And there was a requirement that power must be accountable again, reflected in what happened in the US Constitution and perhaps in the revolution in France. These ideas shape much of modern democracy.

What neoliberalism then did was change the focus of politics and economics. It put markets at the centre of everything. The Enlightenment put ideas at the centre. Neoliberalism puts markets at the centre. It reduced the role of the state, which Enlightenment thinking had enhanced, and it treated people mainly as economic actors, and not as equals amongst others. Citizenship gave way to consumer identity, and political thinking narrowed as a result.

Neoliberalism narrowed our thinking in a key way. Complex ideas were reduced to market logic. That was it. Whenever a politician sees a problem now, they look at it and say, "The market has got a better solution than anything government can find." As a result, they walk away, supposedly leave it to markets, and as we now know from experience, nothing happens and everything gets worse.

What is more, human well-being has been treated as being about prices and incentives. People have been seen as consumers and not citizens, and the richness of earlier thinking about the nature of human existence has been lost. Debate has become much more limited as a result.

Neoliberalism has weakened ethics. That is core to this problem. Equal moral worth has been pushed aside. Market value has become more important than human value. Those without wealth now suffer less recognition because they command fewer resources, and in the neoliberal hierarchy, they are therefore worth less. Equality has disappeared, and social claims have become dependent upon economic power as a result. The consequence is that the moral base of politics has been weakened, if not destroyed.

Neoliberalism used this idea to then weaken institutions. Public services have been cut in the name of efficiency. Democratic accountability has been reduced. The state has become less able to act, and longstanding institutions are being undermined. We're seeing this at present. The attack on the BBC is coordinated, planned, and delivered by neoliberalism. Collective action has become harder, and neoliberalism has oversimplified reality, to create deeper problems.

Markets are assumed to solve problems, but we can see that they don't. Social and environmental complexity has been ignored by neoliberalism. We are now living with the consequences. People feel alienated. The planet is heating. Political changes are treated as technical questions, and problems are allowed to build up rather than be addressed. That's exactly the point about those two issues. People are alienated because the problems have been allowed to accumulate. The planet's problems have not been addressed because neoliberalism deliberately ignored them. That failure is now visible, and what happens when a system fails? It is that people look for answers

elsewhere. That is exactly where we are now.

The response at this moment is not a return to earlier values. Instead, people are moving in the opposite direction. That shift is deeply concerning. We look as though we are going backwards. We're heading for fascism. This is the real risk that we face. What the current backlash against neoliberalism looks like is a move away from core Enlightenment principles. There's less interest in careful reasoning at present than there has been for decades. Simple and crude answers are becoming more commonplace, but the complexity of the questions that they're seeking to answer remain.

The need for equality is being questioned again. After decades where it has been assumed that we are moving closer together and equality gaps are going to be reduced, politicians are now deliberately trying to increase inequality. They are trying to promote differences. Differences between men and women. Difference was between different ethnic groups. Differences between different religious beliefs. Differences between people of different ability, all of these things are happening, and power in this context is demanding loyalty to the leadership of a few, rather than offering explanation or answers to the questions we're facing.

Evidence is, in fact, being replaced by belief. That is what we're being offered. "Trust in me: don't ask me what I think" is the point of modern politics. This shift in public debate is now very clear. In fact, debate is disappearing. It's becoming more hostile, it's becoming more polarised. We're seeing this from the far-right. We might be seeing it from the middle ground as well, who aren't in any way able to deal with the issues that are being raised. Nuance is disappearing from discussion. Assertion is replacing argument. Trust in shared facts is weakening, and informed decision-making is, as a consequence, becoming very much harder.

The warning from the 17th-century thinker, Thomas Hobbes, is that order depends upon trust. He said that without shared rules, life becomes unstable. Social order is something we construct, was his argument. It can be lost if foundations weaken. The risk now feels more immediate than it has at any other point in my life. We should be taking his warning, old as it is, very seriously. Life without government-imposed order is, as he puts it, likely to become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". If that's what you want, choose to move to the far-right. If you want something better, we have to look elsewhere.

Harmful policies are becoming more acceptable. People are facing growing insecurity. Communities are being disrupted. War is again being seen as an acceptable option. Indifference to consequences is increasing, but that direction can only lead us towards harmful outcomes.

Indifference to care can become embedded. Authoritarian tendencies can reinforce that indifference and human well-being need no longer be central to political thinking, which

is where it should be.

The pursuit of personal gain for an elite is the path that we are on, but this did not happen by accident. It happened because we accepted convenient but deeply misleading stories. We've tolerated rising inequality. We've allowed institutions to weaken. We've accepted power shaped by choices, and no longer challenge them.

The path we have chosen is one by default. We have been falsely persuaded that there is no alternative. Margaret Thatcher called it "T.I.N.A.", 'There is no alternative,' and we have come to believe that, but we are wrong. We need to change now because change is possible.

Evidence must return to decision-making.

Democratic accountability must be rebuilt.

Equality for all must be taken seriously again.

And markets must be seen as limited tools to be constrained where they fail or even abuse.

Care must become central to politics.

The choice we still have is between two different futures. The future is still open, but it won't be indefinitely. Progress required effort before now, and it will do so if we are to have it again. We can continue as we are, or we can change direction. Others are trying to close down that choice. The question is, do we act in time to keep open the enlightened option that we need? Will we, is my question?

What do you think? Do you think we're going backwards? Do you think we are facing risk? Do you think that the Enlightenment is fading? Do you think that the options are closing? Let us know. There's a poll down below, and please let us have your comments. We do read them. We do look at them. We do think about them, and they do inform our future video-making. Please also like this video if that's what you do, and please share it because that helps us with YouTube, and if you're so inclined, if you'd like to make a donation, we'd be really grateful. These videos cost money to make.

---

## **Poll**

[poll id="361"]