

# The Narratives We Need <sup>1</sup>

*Strengthening the stories that unite us*

Read the [Wakanda Version](#) of *The Narratives We Need* or [buy the poster](#).

Social movements across Europe face some common framing challenges. We asked over 200 campaigners—environmentalists, feminists, anti-racists, new economists, and many more—what we’re up against, analysed the trends and pulled together the key lessons.

If you’re part of a group organising for social change, we’re sure you’ll be familiar with times of fear, grief and despair in the face of the rhetoric from those in power in the UK, Europe, and across the Atlantic. But then we see bright flashes of hope in social movements changing the story: Black Lives Matter and #MeToo; activists refusing to lie down in the face of horrendous corporate and state failures, such as in the case of the Grenfell activists or the women’s strikes in Spain and Poland; and campaigners worldwide fighting tirelessly for the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

**We at PIRC spent the past year talking with activists and advocates from across Europe about framing.\* In workshops and interviews, we dug into the framing challenges and opportunities our movements are facing.**

We heard a lot of commonality. Our groups, organisations and movements don’t always appear to be working towards a shared vision of change. The dominant narratives we’re up against are toxic and regressive. We analysed the trends, along with our past framing work (a [few recent](#)

examples), and focused on five key areas:

- 1 **What people are like.** *Do we talk about other people as nasty, nice, or more complex?*
- 2 **Who is in our sphere of concern.** *Are we promoting solidarity or charity?*
- 3 **Who is responsible for the problems we face.** *Do we trust them to change?*
- 4 **How the system works.** *How do we talk about power and resources?*
- 5 **Whether (and how) change happens.** *Do we show that change is possible, and celebrate the changes that have come before?*

Current dominant narratives are connecting with some common antisocial or fatalistic core beliefs in each of these areas. But there's another set of widely held core beliefs that aren't given as much airtime in the current climate. It's here where we see the potential for change.

**Across issues, our movements need to strengthen particular core beliefs through our frames.**

We can only create change if we believe it is possible. We can only work to redesign the system if we see that it was designed badly in the first place. We need to agree on who's responsible for this change; and we need to demonstrate trust in other people if we want their participation.

## **What follows are these key lessons...**

\*If you want to read more about what framing is, go to p. 14 of our [Framing Equality Toolkit](#).

# 1 Appeal to people's better selves

*What are people like? Do we have natural, fixed characteristics? And, if so, are they nasty or nice?*

How we think about other people is important because these beliefs shape how we treat others and what we think is the appropriate response when things go wrong. We may believe that humans are naturally competitive, or naturally cooperative, or that it's our environment that shapes how we behave. We should avoid the idea that human nature is fixed or essential, and instead, knowing that we have a bundle of motivations, look for ways to connect with our 'better sides'.

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*People for the main part still think that fairness is a good thing. It's just how it's materialised. People still think for the most part that freedom is a good thing. So obviously there's a contestation for what these terms mean.*

**👤 Interviewee: Social justice facilitator**

## What do people believe about human nature?



## **DARWINISM**

### **Human nature is selfish and competitive**

People will always be out for their own gain, and in conflict with each other. Cooperation might exist, but usually between people with a shared interest or identity that unites them against some other group: there will always be an 'us' and 'them'. Unfortunately, people tend to overestimate the self-interest of others. We've found this in our [Framing the Economy](#) research and Common Cause Foundation's UK values survey, '[Perceptions Matter](#)'. The idea that humans are selfish can be damaging for campaigners. When we assume that certain antisocial traits (like greed) are more common than social traits (like kindness), we accept selfish or unethical behaviour with resignation. We see this belief in attitudes like, 'of course, landlords will charge the maximum rent they can', or, 'it's no surprise that benefits claimants try and game the system'.



## **GOODNESS**

### **Human nature is caring and cooperative**

People are mostly nice. Another evolutionary perspective: we evolved as social animals and so are naturally cooperative; a religious idea that we all have some essential goodness, or a humanist belief in each other. This positive understanding of human nature has the potential to encourage higher levels of trust in others and more motivation to help and cooperate. This belief has a shadow, however, as it doesn't adequately explain why bad things happen: therefore requiring *bad apples* to counter the *good eggs*. This allows an overall positive view of other people to be clouded by an ability to still write-off prisoners, migrants, and multiple 'others'. We see this belief in stories of the UK as a 'caring nation' or of Bristol or Manchester as 'caring cities': promoting community within these spaces.



## **PRODUCT**

### **Humans are shaped by the environment**

People's values, characters, behaviours are all shaped by experiences of society. We might point to the quality and affordability of our schools, the green spaces we have access to, the experience of institutional racism at the hands of the police, or the volume of aggressive advertising. Because society shapes us, then when things go wrong we can address them by making changes in society. This belief allows us to see that the way we treat people will affect their responses and other outcomes. We see this belief in campaigns for rehabilitative rather than punitive justice.

## **What does this mean for our communications?**

✓ **Emphasise people's compassionate qualities.**

Whenever possible, we should appeal to people's shared intrinsic values. We can highlight, for instance, that most of us want others to be safe and happy; that we believe people who are struggling need support, and that we are all embedded in webs of friendship, neighbourhood and community.

✗ **Be wary of villains, victims and heroes.**

In campaigning, it's tempting to use this simple drama triangle, but it can be a damaging and demotivating reduction of human nature. It is more hopeful (and accurate) to acknowledge that people are complex and can change. In particular, we should avoid framing anyone as essentially bad, greedy or selfish. When talking about powerful individuals we should not imply, for instance, that *all* bankers are greedy, or that landlords will *inevitably* exploit their tenants. This can lead to resignation about the prevalence of selfishness and suppress the idea that we can make changes to the system. If we need to vilify, let it be the problem (the policy, the attitude) rather than the person.

✓ **Show how people are shaped by their environment.**

Take all the opportunities we can to talk about the impact that institutions, policies and practices have on people.

✓ **Talk about how the system has been designed to reward greed and competition.**

And how it encourage behaviours that are not in line with our compassionate values. This allows us to talk about how the system negatively impacts people. We must identify selfish behaviour as being a product of how we have chosen to run society and as something we can change.

## What does this look like in practice?

✗ **NOT THIS...**

When Jeremy Corbyn said in May 2017: “**So today, I say to tax cheats, the rip off bosses, the greedy bankers; enough is enough**” he was trying to communicate the system was broken, but he was also characterising elites as being greedy and selfish.





The [#InHerShoes](#) campaign during the Irish abortion referendum was centred on the experience of people who had (or hadn't) had abortions. Because it drew on these real experiences, it highlighted the complex and circumstantial nature of all of our choices. It also appealed to people's better nature: the slogan itself is a call for empathy and understanding. The campaign built on the outstanding success of the [2015 YES campaign](#) during the equal marriage referendum, which was centred on the [shared values](#) of generosity, equality, fairness and inclusivity.

# Promote an expansive, diverse 'us'

*If we want change, who do we want it for, and why?*

The way we think about who we consider 'we' or 'us' is important because it suggests both who we want social change for and who we want to do it with. Particularly in the current political climate, people often talk in fairly closed and exclusive terms about who we should care about. This 'us and them' belief is pervasive, even among activists and campaigners. Two alternative beliefs are in charity or solidarity. When we communicate, we need to be clear about who is included in our sphere of concern, and be careful not to reinforce frames that narrow this.

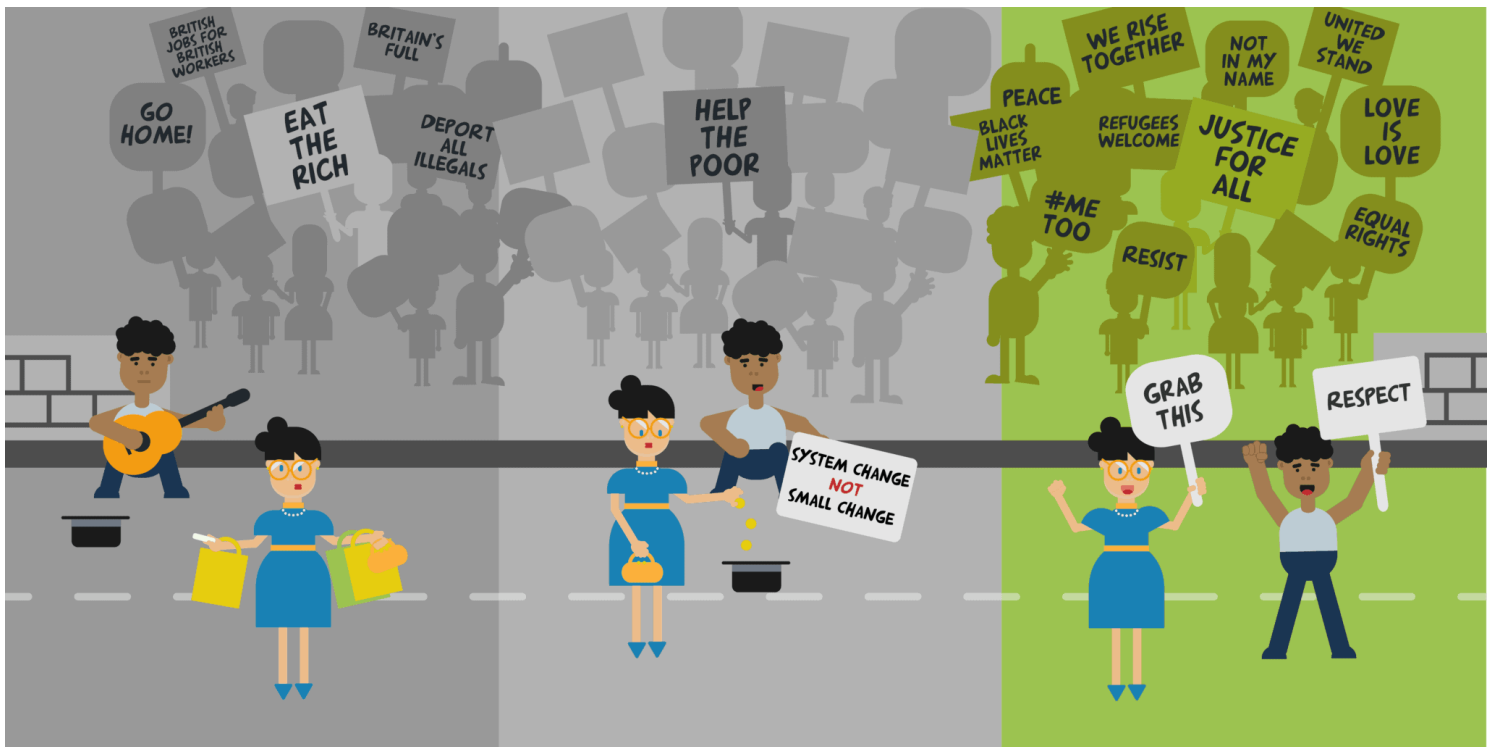
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*I mean there is a... strong division between 'us and them'. And the 'us' has the responsibility, the right, the power, to block the others and leave them.... Some people can talk about 'migrants coming here to steal jobs, commit crime, abuse the welfare system'.... In other words, we have something that is ours, and these other people don't have the right to it: no right to access this space.*

**👤 Interviewee: Migration campaigner**

## Who do people believe we should care about?





## **OTHERING**

### **Caring only for people like us**

An exclusive understanding of 'we', implicitly (or explicitly) hierarchical in terms of particular identities, such as nation or ethnicity. There's often an 'uncivilised other' posing a threat (security, pollution, contagion) that 'we' must protect ourselves against. This belief feeds racism, nationalism, and many other forms of exclusion. For example, racist, anti-Gypsy, Roma & Traveller, and anti-LGBTI narratives often refer to fear of contagion or pollution from dirtiness or undesirable behaviours.



# **CHARITY**

## **Caring for those that deserve our help**

Power and wealth disparities are natural, but those higher up the social ladder can help those lower down *if* (and it's a big if) they are worthy. We show care for others with handouts, not by changing structures. This belief can help us to see the importance in addressing immediate needs, but it reinforces existing power structures. It is a common belief employed in narratives around poverty and when talking about protecting vulnerable communities (a [classic](#)).

# **SOLIDARITY**

## **Standing together**

A belief in a bigger 'we', across borders and identities. Power is not held equally at the moment, this is historically-based, and this could be changed through working together to demand something different. It helps us see that change needs to be structural. We see this belief expressed in Black Lives Matter and many solidarity movements.

## **What does this mean for our communications?**

### **✓ Talk about a 'big' we(!).**

Be inclusive: build a sense of the collective, and emphasise universal rights. Highlight commonalities and shared identities, but don't hide power disparities. Be honest about the specific needs and experiences of particular groups. For example, Black Lives Matter highlight the current power imbalance between white people and people of colour. They build the sense of common experience of people of colour, and demand the structural changes in order that the black and white experiences *both* matter in society.

### **✓ Make diversity normal.**

The less that 'difference' indicates something unusual, the less people are likely to think it is bad or dangerous. In some cases, 'difference' is not uncommon, just unseen (for example, in the case of mental health or sexuality). This also means that we should

challenge the idea that things are okay as long as they're *behind closed doors*. We should promote the idea that it's okay for people to be their whole selves, both at home and in public.

✘ **Avoid reinforcing 'us and them' narratives.**

(As much as possible.) As an example, think of the way that Brexit voters have often been characterised by Remain voters. But there are many reasons people voted for Brexit, just as there are many points of agreement between Brexit and Remain voters on the type of society we'd like to live in. This 'us and them' thinking only maintains divisions, rather than building bridges, and hampers our ability to build support for progressive change by alienating vast swathes of people.

✘ **Avoid appealing to charity.**

Appealing to people's sense of moral obligation towards needy others is often successful, because people are generally kind. But often, these narratives obscure the reasons for poverty and power imbalances (for example, colonisation and imperialism). On top of this, they can strengthen 'charity begins at home' thinking, which isn't a helpful response to structural problems.

## What does this look like in practice?

✘ **NOT THIS...**

In the debate about the treatment of the Windrush generation, there was an implicit questioning of who gets to be 'British'. Making the case for this set of immigrants often relied on whether they could be promoted to being 'us': how much they'd contributed to British society, and how British they were as a consequence. But the implicit message is that immigrants who haven't contributed, or who don't come from ex-British colonies, aren't 'us'. See this debate on Sky News as an example. There is much questioning around 'legal' versus 'illegal' immigration, but (our very own) Kimberley McIntosh makes clear that the hostile environment doesn't really differentiate.

 **THIS!**

The Occupy movement created a strong **solidarity** frame around the idea of the 99% and the 1%. Power structures were embedded within the frame (although it obviously glossed over the power imbalances within the 99%). It created an opportunity for people to have solidarity across borders, calling out the failures of the global economic system.

# 3 Call for collective responsibility

***Whose fault is it when things go wrong or people struggle? And who's responsible for fixing it?***

Who we think is responsible for suffering or success shapes the type of social change we believe in. For example: should we punish individuals for their actions, or do we see them as part of a collective, with shared responsibility? In practice this is sometimes quite muddled. People can assign blame and responsibility in entirely contradictory ways, often in the same sentence. We see these beliefs split between the individual, elites, or the wider collective. We need to talk about responsibility appropriately: thinking about how much power each person or group has to affect change in their own lives and in the system.

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*We have such a victim-blaming mentality in society... corporations or the government are responsible for a lot of the ills [and] are never really held to account, it's always common people... that stretches from benefit fraud through to the environment and making people feel like they're the ones to blame [by] using too much water or electricity or wasting food.*

**👤 Interviewee: Trans health rights campaigner**

## **What do people believe about responsibility?**

## **INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY**

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### **Each of us is responsible for our own fate**

Probably one of the most common beliefs is that all problems and solutions are down to individual responsibility and choice. We talk about 'winners' and 'losers', 'strivers' and 'skivers': if someone is doing well, it's because they have worked hard and they deserve it; if someone is having a hard time, they must have done something to deserve it. This belief leads to support for punitive justice and detracts from calls for structural change. We see this belief play out in narratives around victims and survivors of domestic or sexual violence, in the framing of responses to mental health and poverty, homelessness, refugees, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller rights who are seen to be choosing to live outside of the system.

## **ELITE RESPONSIBILITY**

### **Those at the top are responsible**

People in power hold responsibility for problems and for solutions. This belief is often particularly muddled. We may place a lot of blame at the doors of government, banks, media or other corporations for the problems we face, and may also believe they are (or should be) responsible for protecting us or creating change. We may be really mistrustful of elites, yet we may also have faith that it is only through their power that change happens. This belief feeds resentment, apathy and division. We see this belief at play in our perception of the criminal justice system—including in cases of domestic violence—where the law is portrayed as being fair and the government is portrayed as making good laws. This stands in the way of talking about the need for change.

## **COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

### **We all have a role to play**

We all have a role to play in the creation of the type of society we live in: not alone, but as a group. We each contribute to the collective, through our own actions as part of a whole: through voting, community action, how we treat each other. This belief allows us to understand a role for everyone, without blaming individuals. We see this belief most widely applied to children's rights: think of framing such as 'we let them down'. In the UK we may also apply this to shared institutions like the NHS.

## **What does this mean for our communications?**

- ✓ **Talk about collective achievement and possibility.**

Social change is often discussed as individual achievement: for example, the civil rights movement becomes reduced to the work of heroic individuals such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. But this squeezes out the role of vast numbers of other normal people like you and me and makes it seem less possible that we could also be involved in social change.

✘ **Avoid implying that individuals are fully responsible for their successes and failures.**

Human stories—for example, individuals who have overcome hard times—can help people relate to the bigger issues. But we should celebrate these individuals as embedded in wider groups and collectives, and avoid overemphasising individual action as the solution to our problems. For example, we see it in campaigns in which individuals are seen to hold the key to tackling racism by not discriminating against others, or to their own mental health by making some superficial lifestyle changes. While each of us can do our bit in all of these instances (yes, I can check my own prejudices; and I can do more exercise if I have time), what we miss in these campaigns is the structures propping these problems up.

✔ **Talk about rotten systems not rotten apples.**

Rather than implying that individuals are to blame for big problems, we should refer to decisions, policy and design. Highlight that the system is designed and can be redesigned. In any big scandal or crisis where there is institutionalised malpractice, challenge the framing of individual scapegoats. Similarly, we should avoid focusing on individual people in positions of power for the issues we see: these people are replaceable, but it's the system behind them that's the real problem.

✔ **Create the space for those we blame to change.**

People are already cynical and mistrustful of politics and institutions, and it makes us fatalistic. Avoid reinforcing this: demonstrate trust in other people, elites and institutions to take responsibility for problems they played a part in. We can—and should—still hold people to account.

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“ *The narrative from the community [around Grenfell Tower] from the immediate aftermath—where us as a community and the wider nation all came together—that was a really good narrative because it showed us that we have capacity, that when the going gets tough we really can do it. We didn’t have much help from services so for a lot of us it was a real wake-up call, it was like ‘yes we can do this.’*

 **Interviewee: Local housing activist**

## What does this look like in practice?

 **NOT THIS...**

Some cancer campaigning focuses in on the individual, using the language of ‘fighting’ and ‘beating’ cancer, implying that you can also ‘lose’, or, in this case, not be tough enough. Campaigns often also focus on individual behaviours—such as eating and drinking habits and weight—which, in addition to implying individual responsibility for your chances when you have cancer, imply this responsibility also exists for getting it in the first place. The flip of this is to point to the structural and systemic causes of cancer, such as poverty and structural disadvantage.

 **THIS!**

Since the fire at Grenfell Tower, local activists and campaigners have been vociferous and clear about responsibility in their framing of the continued struggle for justice (at marches, regular walks and communications with media and politicians). As well as calling for accountability for individuals in positions of power, they have been clear about responsibility in the wider system: austerity, gentrification, classism and racism, for example. They have highlighted the collective responsibility we all hold to each other in looking after each other and finding justice.

# Talk about how the system is designed for inequality

*Why are things the way they are? Is the system fair, or not?*

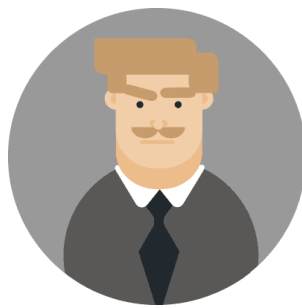
Beliefs about how the system works are important because they shape whether we think change is possible, and what kind of solutions we can imagine. Whether we claim to understand it or not, we hold a set of assumptions about how it works: whether it's natural or created, fair or unfair. We need our communications to demonstrate that the system has been designed, and that redesigns are possible and desirable.

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*The big challenge is patriarchy, heteronormativity, mononormativity and cisnormativity and that generally society is traditional and it's not open to new ideas and change.*

**👤 Interviewee: Feminist activist**

## What do people believe about how the system works?



## **NATURAL HIERARCHY**

### **The system is natural and fair**

The belief that there are natural, even moral, differences between groups of people: men and women; rich and poor; black and white; gay and straight. (Our modern-day version of the divine right of kings.) These groups come in a pecking order based on natural characteristics, so inequalities are both inevitable and fair. This belief leads us to conclude that there's no point trying to change anything. For example, 'there will always be a rich and poor'; 'a woman's place is in the home'.



## **ZERO-SUM**

### **The system is naturally unfair**

This is based on the idea that we have scarce resources. There is only so much to go around and this is the natural state of affairs. When one group benefits from these resources then another inevitably loses out. Zero-sum beliefs allow us to engage in prioritisation exercises in which some people win and some people lose. We see this in people blaming migrants for 'coming over here and taking our [insert jobs / houses / doctors]'; or the accusation that groups seek 'special rights' for themselves, when resources are needed elsewhere (for example that NHS money on gender reassignment should be spent on 'more pressing priorities' like cancer treatment).



## **MERITOCRACY**

### **The system is fairly designed**

The belief that we've successfully organised our system to ignore natural differences and reward or punish people based purely on merit. This belief leads to the thinking that individuals have to earn their place in society through what they contribute. We see this emerge in thinking such as 'anyone can succeed if they just try hard enough'; 'may the best man win', or in the stigmatising of poverty.



## **KYRIARCHY**

### **The system is unfairly designed**

The belief that the system has been organised to benefit a small minority, at the expense of the majority. This design is built upon vast power imbalances between global North and South, and along the lines of race, gender, class and ability. It results in environmental degradation, exploitation, sexism, racism, classism and ableism. This belief allows us to see that the system is propped up by the choices of today, and by making different choices, we can redesign the system. We see this thinking in the campaigning of undocumented migrants in America, in which [activists have highlighted](#) how the US economic system relies on the exploitation of these migrants whilst simultaneously scapegoating them for economic issues.

## What does this mean for our communications?

### ✓ **Talk about the system's design issues, and make the case for redesign.**

Natural hierarchy, zero-sum game and meritocracy are all interpretations of the system that can trap us into justifying the way things are and lead us to thinking that threats to the status quo are dangerous or deviant. To tackle these justifications of the system, we must highlight the power imbalances in the system and show how these are reinforced by policy and other choices. Following extensive research in our [Framing the Economy](#) project, we particularly recommend using the metaphor of 'Reprogramming' when talking about the economy's design faults. In general, metaphors of movement, kinetics and evolution are helpful for making systems change seem possible ('we want to *evolve* in this direction'), while the language of categorical change ('we want to *move from A to B*') can lead to overwhelm.

### ✗ **Avoid getting stuck in zero-sum debates.**

Scarcity is sometimes the reality and we are occasionally forced into zero-sum decisions. However, we can avoid reinforcing unhelpful beliefs (like 'some people will always lose out') by:

#### ✓ **Refusing to accept the language of prioritisation.**

When our causes are framed as 'not a priority', if we counter that they *are* a priority then we risk feeding the core belief that we're competing for scarce resources. Instead we can assert that the cause is 'important' or 'necessary': focusing on its inherent worth, rather than its worth relative to something else.

#### ✓ **Focusing on the abundance of resources we have.**

Such as rights, freedoms, money (not natural resources!).

#### ✓ **Emphasising how our causes help everyone.**

When our causes are framed as 'special interest', it can feed the justification of the allocation of resources somewhere else. Think about Common Weal framing of the move from 'me first' politics to 'all of us first politics'.

## What does this look like in practice?

✗ NOT THIS...

The image shows a screenshot of a website titled "KICK A MIGRANT". The main content area features a profile for Kumar Singh. On the left, there is a photo of a man in a Scout uniform. To the right, a text box titled "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?" describes his background: "Kumar Singh came to Australia 10 years ago after graduating from university with a business degree. He now owns a Convenience store and employs 10 Australian workers. Kumar is also the local Scout leader and a valued member of his community." Below this, it states "Impact on the Australian Economy: -\$481,640". A table lists his details: Name: Kumar Singh, Education: Ba (Hons) Business, Status: Australian Citizen, Job in Australia: Business Owner. At the bottom, it shows "Total distance thrown (km): 1295.172". A green button says "KICK AGAIN?". In the bottom left corner, there is a summary: "TOTAL MIGRANTS KICKED: 3,768,859", "GLOBAL RANK: 111,660", and "YOUR BEST: 1295.172KM". The bottom right corner says "Site by Amnesia web/blog".

**KICK A MIGRANT**

**WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?**

Kumar Singh came to Australia 10 years ago after graduating from university with a business degree. He now owns a Convenience store and employs 10 Australian workers. Kumar is also the local Scout leader and a valued member of his community.

Impact on the Australian Economy:  
**-\$481,640**

<b>Name:</b>	<b>Education:</b>
Kumar Singh	Ba (Hons) Business
<b>Status:</b>	<b>Job in Australia:</b>
Australian Citizen	Business Owner

Total distance thrown (km): 1295.172

**KICK AGAIN?**

TOTAL MIGRANTS KICKED: 3,768,859  
GLOBAL RANK: 111,660  
YOUR BEST: 1295.172KM

Site by Amnesia web/blog

'Kick a migrant'. Hard to know where to start with a campaign that lets you boot virtual migrants into the ocean and then flashes their economic credentials at you—*he was worth \$481,640 dollars!*—whilst their brown bodies sink into the waves. Aside from reducing human life to a dollar sign, this campaign also sends out the meritocratic message that the system should reward the people who contribute through hard work. This doesn't help us talk about how the system needs to be redesigned, or what type of designs we'd like to see.





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**We will reprogramme  
our economy.**

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Jeremy Corbyn



When the leader of the opposition used the framing of ‘reprogramme’, ‘reboot’ and ‘replace’ in his 2018 ‘Build it in Britain’ speech, he was saying that our economic problems are down to poor design and political decision-making, which helped him make the case for policy changes.



# Show that change is possible and that people can make it happen

*Do we believe things can ever change, or are we stuck in a permanent rut? How does it happen, if so?*

It is essential that people believe that change is possible because this is key to motivating action. We need this alongside a sharp analysis of what is wrong and a vision of the society we want to live in. In our work, we've often found a fatalistic tendency in people's beliefs about change—that 'there is no alternative' or that there is a 'march of inevitable progress'—although there is an alternative belief centred on human struggle. We need to counteract fatalism by showing how people have been, and continue to be, struggling for change.

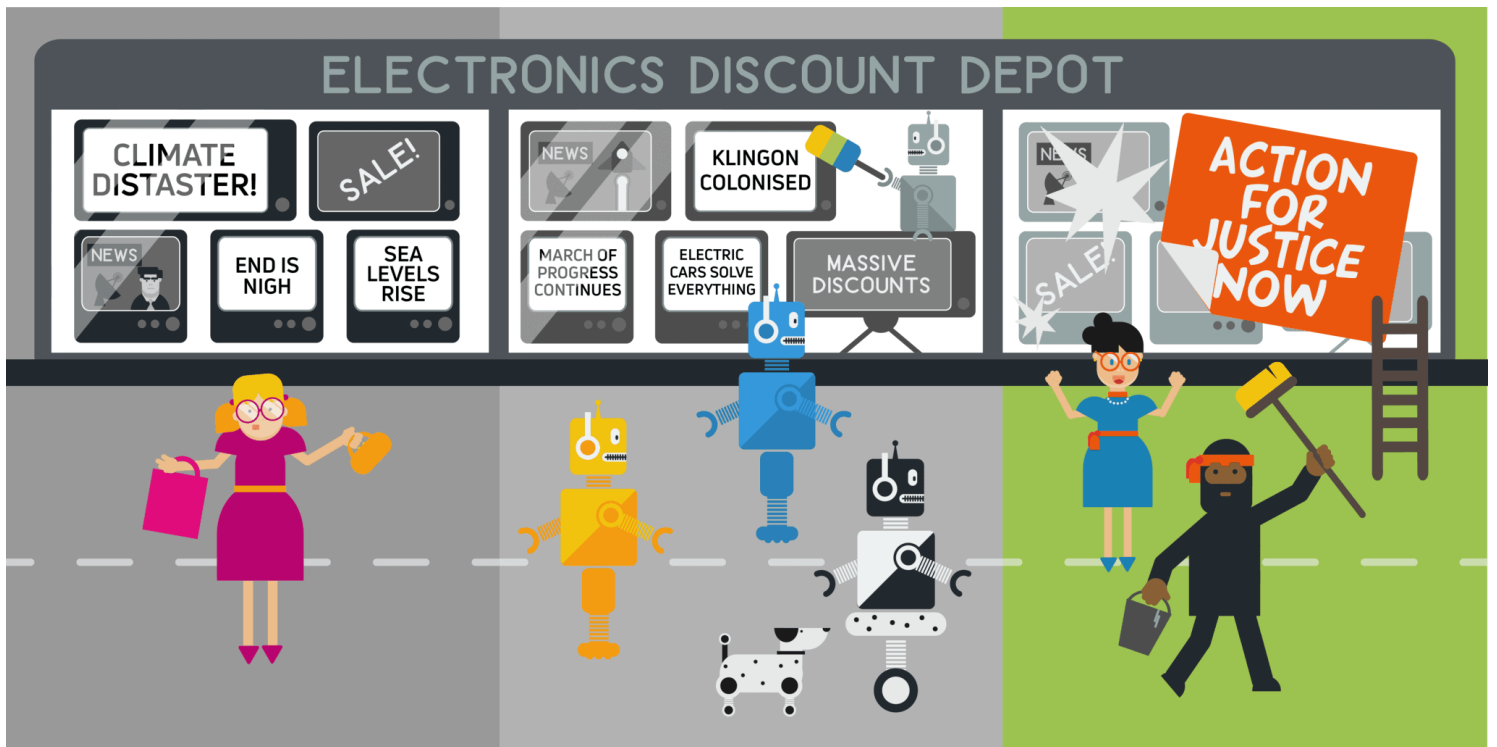
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*There is an issue to convince people we're right. But the bigger problem is I think to convince people that it can happen, that it's realistic.*

**👤 Interviewee: Trade unionist**

## What beliefs do people have about change?

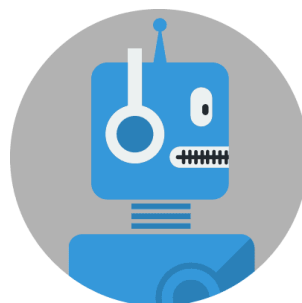
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**TINA**

**There is no alternative**

The system is naturally like this; it couldn't work any other way. This has been proved by the failure of other systems (such as the fall of communist states or entrenched racism). This belief allows us to justify the way things are as perhaps the lesser of two (or more) evils and blocks change. For example, housing campaigners identified beliefs about the housing market and class systems being natural and set as a key barrier to progress on the issue.



**MARCH OF INEVITABLE PROGRESS**

## Things will get better

a) Historically, over time, things have got progressively better: people are more tolerant, life expectancy is going up. This is natural progress. b) Technological innovation will solve big problems. c) Market forces and competition, left to their own devices, will sort everything out. This belief seems more optimistic, but inevitably still leads to a type of fatalism, in which we don't see the need to act ourselves. We see this play out in many climate change narratives in which, firstly, climate change itself may be framed as within the bounds of 'normal' and 'natural' bounds, and, secondly, many fall back on technological optimism.



## **STRUGGLE**

### **Things will get better if we make them**

We've made changes in the past (abolition, labour rights, women's emancipation, LGBTI rights), we're making change now, and these changes come about through collective endeavour. There are many alternatives happening now: community initiatives, policies in other countries. This belief allows us to see that change is possible. We see this in Pride events around the world, which are often rooted in the history of struggle, the celebration of change that has happened, and the calls for continued change.

## **What does this mean for our communications?**

### ✓ **Celebrate struggle.**

The key thing is to highlight change is possible and to avoid falling into doom and gloom traps. We know this can be difficult when faced with a climate apocalypse and so many seemingly entrenched systems of power. So: how? Talk about big changes we're making and have already made, emphasising collective responses. This allows us to feel that change is possible, and perhaps even to see our own place in it. Beautiful Trouble is full of great case studies if you need some inspiration.

### ✓ **Highlight the role of people in making change happen.**

(Particularly the people you're talking to!) It's a good start for us to believe that change is possible, but the next step is to see our own place in it. If you're talking about technological advances, focus on the people behind it.

✘ **Avoid fueling narratives that suggest problems are entrenched.**

In our work on [Framing the Economy](#), we regularly saw a lack of belief in alternative economic systems strongly connected to fatalism, which often looked like apathy: because if we don't believe we *can* change the system, why are we going to try?

✔ **Show how the action you're suggesting is strategic.**

"People aren't stupid: they know that if there are wholesale changes in the global climate underway, these will not be reversed merely through checking their tyre pressures or switching their TV off standby." We need to show how the changes we want will be created through the actions we're proposing. Big problems need big solutions, but people also need small actions that clearly fit within these big solutions.

## What does this look like in practice?

✘ **NOT THIS...**



The Remain campaign during the EU referendum campaign in the UK in 2016 relied heavily on the argument that there was no viable alternative to the EU, and that the EU represented the march of progress. Boiled down, the campaign essentially told us that we must keep things the same, and instead we were thrown into the current chaos.





# Put 'em together and what have you got?

Whatever we campaign on, these are some of the core beliefs we face about why things are the way they are, and whether or not they can change. We need to be strategic in how we talk about human nature, 'us', responsibility, the system and change. This is not just a messaging job, but a job of working together on our shared understanding of society's problems and the solutions we want to see. From our extensive research at PIRC on framing, including of [LGBTI equality](#), the [economy](#), [nature conservation](#), and from hundreds of interviews and workshops with campaigners, there is a common set of beliefs that underpin the challenges faced across our movements and civil society. But this also highlights the foundations of a shared vision for change. There is a set of beliefs that we should work to strengthen together. The way we frame any issue—through our communications, the policies or behaviours we advocate, and our own practices—can reinforce some ways of thinking over others. None of our individual groups can do this alone: it will require a coordinated effort. Together, we can encourage thinking that is more compassionate, equitable, inclusive and sustainable if we:

- 1 **Appeal to people's better selves** and emphasise how people are shaped by their environment.
- 2 **Promote an expansive, diverse understanding of 'us'**, for example, by steering clear of charity framing.
- 3 **Call for collective responsibility** and demonstrate trust for the people and institutions we call upon to make changes.
- 4 **Show that change is possible** and that people can make it happen through celebrating the changes we've made in the past and are making right now.
- 5 **Talk about how the system is designed** for inequality and avoid getting stuck in zero-sum debates about where we allocate scarce resources.

Of course, getting our communication right is not the only route to social and environmental change: we can't just talk our way out of this mess. We also need to be doing the intellectual work on the specific policies and interventions we demand, and we need more shared infrastructure to organise our communications and train our spokespeople. When we get the framing wrong, we can unwittingly strengthen the ways of thinking that justify the broken system we have at the moment. But when our movements are strong and we get the framing right: we can bring new worlds into being.

## So what now?

- ★ **Connect.** Who could you connect with more, knowing that our struggles are all so intimately linked? Find them and explore how to work together. Connect with networks and groups working to strengthen movement communications infrastructure, like [NEON](#). [Get in touch with us](#) and tell us what you're already doing and what you'd like to do. And [sign up for our newsletter](#): we'll publish more on all of this soon.
- ★ **Engage.** Where can you engage more with framing? PIRC regularly run framing workshops ([join our newsletter!](#)) and we have guides to download, including on the framing of [LGBTI equality](#), the [economy](#) and [nature conservation](#). We're also surrounded by friendly giants like the [Centre for Story-Based Strategy](#), the [Frameworks Institute](#), [Anat Shenker Osorio](#), the [Common Cause Foundation](#), [The Rules](#), and many others, who have lots of amazing reading and tools to engage with.
- ★ **Experiment!** How will you know if your communication ideas are going to work? There's no blueprint for the perfect frame, but understanding these beliefs should provide some good guidance. Now it's time to try putting these recommendations into practice and to **test your ideas!**

## A word of thanks!

We are standing on the shoulders of giants. In particular, we would like to thank:

- ♥ **The hundreds of workshop participants**—campaigners, activists, researchers and communications professionals—who took part in 'narrative mapping' exercises. In the past three years, this has included workshops on domestic violence, housing justice, LGBTI equality, nature conservation, pharmaceuticals, deregulation, and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller rights (as well as several open workshops) and we asked participants to tell us what 'barrier' and 'enabling' beliefs people hold. We used a lot of post-its.



- ♥ **The thirty campaigners we interviewed in depth**, working across Europe on issues as diverse as mental health, housing, food and agriculture and labour rights. We asked questions like: ‘what framing challenges are you up against in your work?’ and, ‘what framing opportunities do you have?’ and to our amazement these questions made sense.
- ♥ **The authors and partner organisations of 15 PIRC publications** on framing and values, produced over the last ten years. We mined these for research on how people think and to ensure we had evidence for the framing recommendations we present here.
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