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# **EXTREMIST OPPORTUNISM IN THE COVID ECONOMY**

**HOW EXTREMISTS ARE USING THE COVID ECONOMY  
AS A RECRUITING TOOL AND A SPRINGBOARD  
FOR RADICAL IDEAS**

**BY JACK BUCKBY**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID economy presents a unique challenge to Western nations. It is an economic crisis unlike most others in that it was caused entirely by governmental decisions to forcefully close businesses and pay workers to stay at home. The British economy could shrink by as much as 14 percent by the end of 2020, and the Chief Executive of the Royal Bank of Canada, David McKay, said that the effect of COVID lockdowns were “much more severe than the financial crisis.”

Unemployment in the United States surpassed 50 million by the end of May, and the Canadian government subsidized roughly 10 percent of the national workforce in April. The economic impact of COVID-19 has overwhelmingly been felt most by younger, working class, non-university-educated people in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

As with the 2008 financial crisis, such an impact presents an opportunity for far-left and far-right extremists to recruit off the back of legitimate grievances. Coupled with the divisive nature of modern politics, as well as the fact that people are spending more time at home, Western nations are presented with the very real threat of large groups of young people being radicalised by online extremist communities.

Historically, far-right extremists have capitalised more effectively on economic crises. Data shows that between 1919 and 2014, far-right parties saw an increase in vote share from six to 10 percent five years before and after economic crises. The rise of the British National Party in 2008 demonstrates how negative economic conditions that disproportionately affecting young, working-class people allows extremists to capitalise on legitimate grievances.

Far-left parties have historically not capitalised as effectively as far-right extremists on economic crises—but during the COVID economy, far-left politicians and activists are using new-found government willingness to bail out businesses and individuals through economic stimulus packages as a way of normalising extremist economic ideas. Furthermore, far-left activists are piggybacking off the increasing support for ideas like Universal Basic Income and using economic justice as a cover for extremist social policies, including overtly racist policies advocated by the likes of Black Lives Matter.

Far-left activists are utilising social media to mainstream these ideas, aided by elected politicians.

Meanwhile, authorities are underestimating the threat from the far right by focusing on trivial campaign activities from largely unknown groups. The COVID economy, joblessness, and the increasing prevalence of divisive far-left identity politics is lending credibility to the arguments of far-right extremists who use legitimate grievances to recruit. If left unchecked, these far-right extremists may successfully radicalise a new generation of extremists by introducing them to conspiracy theories that offer easy answers to complicated questions relating to immigration, the economy, and identity.

Economic uncertainty combined with the divisive political climate has resulted in a cycle of reciprocal extremism that will only get worse unless politicians are willing to address difficult issues and strip extremists of their grip on those issues. Part of the blame for this reciprocal extremism must be placed at the feet of educational and media institutions that have perpetuated divisive, racist concepts like “whiteness” and “white privilege” which have

made the politics of the far right more attractive to young men. This effect is heightened during the COVID economy.

By implementing new policy measures, Canadian, British, and American politicians have an opportunity to prevent extremism during the first three stages of Professor Randy Borum's four-stage model for the emergence of a terrorist mindset.

Extremists are created after witnessing an initial unsatisfying event or "Grievance", which is the COVID economy and mass unemployment in this instance. Individuals then experience a sense of "Injustice", which moves onto "Target Attribution" whereby extremists encourage vulnerable people to focus hatred or anger towards a specific group. By addressing extremism during these first three stages, politicians can avoid large numbers of people entering the "Distancing/Devaluation" stage in which far-left, and far-right extremists push hate campaigns that often result in violence.

Western governments could damage the ability of extremists to capitalise on economic uncertainty by introducing policy initiatives that undercut the messaging of extremists and any grip they attempt to maintain over divisive and difficult issues.

This paper will examine the nature of far-right extremism in the truest sense of the term, and how far-right extremists can use the COVID economy to recruit in the same way they did during and after the 2008 crash, and in other historic recessions. It will also consider the impact of far-left extremism and the mainstreaming of radical left-wing ideas during the COVID economy.

This paper makes the following recommendations for the governments of the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. These proposals are rooted in the concept of addressing Grievance—the first stage of the process of radicalisation—before extremists have an opportunity to capitalise on a lack of action by the politicians.

- Hosting weekly press briefings on the state of the economy and using those briefings to level with the public about the negative impact that lockdown has had on the economy. The press briefings would be honest about how economic stimulus packages have steadied the ship but caused long-term economic problems, while educating people about the damage that can be done through excessive spending, borrowing, and quantitative easing.
- Considering short-term immigration policy initiatives designed to reduce competition for non-university-educated workers and refraining from engaging in divisive partisan campaigns over immigration.
- Publicly rejecting divisive and racist policy initiatives advocated by extremist groups like Black Lives Matter (and which have been published by mainstream outlets) while reaffirming a commitment to building an economy that works for people of all ethnic backgrounds.
- Engaging in a social media public information campaign that keeps people informed about the state of the economy. Such a public awareness campaign would address the causes of high unemployment, the impact it has had on people of all ethnic backgrounds, and help people envision a future beyond the COVID economy. Such a measure would undercut the ability of extremists to capitalise on these issues and claim that mainstream politicians are unwilling to address them.

## INTRODUCTION

Lockdown measures implemented by Western governments in response to the COVID-19 outbreak presented various challenges for government. The economic damage caused by lockdown measures wasn't just a short-term hit, but instead caused long-lasting damage and plummeted Western economies into the biggest economic downturn since the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup>

This presents an immediate challenge for policy makers, economists, and global business leaders in the sense of rebuilding national economies, but it also presents social challenges within communities hit the hardest by the downturn. The COVID economy, and lockdown measures that allowed professional and university-educated workers to work from home, exposed deep divides in society and put the poorest out of work.

As uncertainty remains, non-university-educated workers face a long journey back into regular employment, with many facing many more months of dependence on state benefits, and those lucky enough to go back to work on reduced hours or potentially reduced pay. The COVID economy arrived during the most volatile political climate in decades, and as well as the historical threat of far-right extremists capitalizing on low employment and a sense of political neglect, far-left extremists are presented with an opportunity to package up radical social policy in proposals portrayed as economic rescue initiatives.

If the effects of lockdown and the COVID economy persist into 2021 and beyond, Western leaders may be presented with a scenario where far-left and far-right extremists have normalised their radical ideas and pose a threat to the stability of national economies and society too. As riots engulf the United States in the run-up to the November presidential election—the first major test of a newly-emboldened far left that has taken control of the Democratic Party—Western leaders are faced with the choice of addressing the root causes of extremism, or taking a chance and letting the sense of injustice felt by the lowest paid in society fester.

If left unchallenged, society will feel the hit of reciprocal extremism and the bitter war between the far left and far right. In the COVID economy, politicians are presented with a situation whereby common grievances relating to either immigration or the economy are amplified. These issues can be utilized by both far-left and far-right extremists, creating a cycle of reciprocal extremism that is typically only recognised between far-right extremists and Islamists.



## THE COVID ECONOMY

The outbreak of COVID-19 turned world economies upside down. Starting in March, the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada implemented lockdown measures that forced nonessential businesses to close while governments assessed the next steps in controlling the outbreak.

The United Kingdom arguably did more than other Western nation to prop up its economy, opting not just to provide one-off cheques and financial assistance to those who lost their jobs, but instead to introduce a furlough scheme designed to save jobs in the first place. Between March and June, the British government spent some GBP£56 billion on economic support measures. 8.7 million jobs were saved under the furlough scheme which paid employees 80 percent of their monthly salary up to GBP£2,500 per month. This furlough scheme was promised to stay in place until November, giving businesses financial relief in the hope that those employees could return to their jobs once the economy settled.

According to the Bank of England and the Office for National Statistics, the UK economy could shrink by as much as 14 percent by the end of the year, even if the government's measures work and the economy bounces back strongly.

In the United States, President Donald Trump has made it clear he envisions a V-shaped recession, and that the economy could bounce back in the way it did after the recession of 1953. The response from the United States was significantly different to the UK, owing largely to the size of the country and its vastly different political structure. The British government quickly put together the furlough scheme and implemented it courtesy of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's substantial voting majority in Parliament. In the United States, President Trump was forced to change track on his original plan to abolish payroll tax in hope that it would allow businesses to avoid laying off employees.

Instead, Trump and his GOP worked with the Democrats on alternative COVID economic relief packages that included one-off direct cash injections into American households.

Individual governors were also largely responsible for the extent of the lockdowns in their states, resulting in some states seeing a greater hit on their economy than others.

In Canada, the C.D. Howe Institute Business Cycle Council argued on May 1st that the country had officially entered a recession. The Canadian economy peaked in February, a month before lockdown came into place, and slipped into a recession,<sup>2</sup> according to the council, by the end of the first quarter of 2020. This claim is contested, as a recession is typically only declared after two consecutive quarters of negative growth, but the effect on the economy was substantial and measurable. The Chief Executive of the Royal Bank of Canada, David McKay, said the effect of COVID lockdowns were "much more severe than the financial crisis."<sup>3</sup>

McKay, along with the CEO of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce Victor Dodig predicted a slow economic recovery as a result of consumers changing the way they spend over fears that the virus may spike again.

## GLOBAL IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT

In April, the International Labor Organization published predictions that global unemployment may rise by between 5.3 million and 24.7 million, people based on their global GDP estimates.<sup>4</sup> The estimates severely underestimated the impact of the virus. United States unemployment alone went above and beyond that, with jobless claims reaching almost 50 million by the beginning of July.<sup>5</sup>

On May 30th, the Institute for Government published a five-nation comparison<sup>6</sup> of the impact of the coronavirus on the UK, Australian, Canadian, Irish, and US economies. It showed how the Canadian government subsidised roughly 10 percent of the national workforce in April, and that the percentage of people receiving unemployment benefits rose from under 1 percent to 18 percent within weeks. It also showed that the UK was suffering least, but that isn't the full story.

25 percent of the UK's employees were furloughed by the beginning of May, and nobody really knows just how many of these jobs will still exist on the other side of this. Furlough pay keeps the employees on the payroll for now, but businesses will need to both exist, and be able to afford to pay employees, for British workers to go back to work on the other side of this pandemic. Unemployment in the UK could, realistically, exceed 30 percent.<sup>7</sup> In June, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was warned that unemployment would hit 4.5 million.<sup>8</sup>

In Canada, the unemployment figures more than doubled, reaching almost 14 percent by April. Labour force participation fell by 59.8 percent<sup>9</sup> between February and April, meaning people also aren't searching for work.

### Key Global Economic Events That Will Affect Unemployment:

- The hotel industry declined globally, with gross operating profit per available room declining by 110.6 percent<sup>10</sup> year-on-year. It is the biggest decline ever recorded, driven by an unprecedented drop in revenue. The U.S. travel, tourism, and hospitality industry alone sought USD\$150 B in aid to compensate.<sup>11</sup>
- The global travel sector is expected to take a hit of USD\$820 B.<sup>12</sup>
- Global retail spending could drop by more than USD\$500 B<sup>13</sup> in 2020, putting strain on global retail businesses.



## GLOBAL DISRUPTION INTO THE FUTURE

Economic disruption is likely to go on for some time and could potentially stretch into the second quarter of 2021. The job market will feel the effect of COVID for as long as consumers avoid unnecessary expenditure and unnecessary social contact over fears of a second wave of the outbreak. Businesses will also need some time to catch up on revenue lost, pay debts that have built up over a period of months, and increase revenue from new sales.

The Chairman of the US Federal Reserve predicted that their economy could “easily” contract by between 20 and 30 percent<sup>14</sup> during the remainder of the pandemic, and that the economic downturn could last until the end of 2021, or until a vaccine is developed.

Recovery across the Anglosphere, and every other affected economy, won't be simple. President Trump celebrated an unexpected increase in nonfarm payrolls in early June. Payrolls increased by 2.5 million in May,<sup>15</sup> despite Wall Street estimates of an 8.3 million decline. It was touted as the early signs of a great American comeback, but the figures represented the businesses that survived lockdown bouncing back as many states began to reopen. It remains uncertain just how many other businesses have survived lockdown in the first place, and how long it will take for those that do survive to return to their pre-COVID staffing levels.

Canada's economy did not enjoy the same historically low unemployment levels as the United States before coronavirus hit, so recovery could take even longer. Growth in the final quarter of 2019 was only 0.3 percent. Some economists have predicted that Canadian businesses may be able to get back to work in the third and fourth quarters in 2020, but there will likely be a lag. Looking East to China shows that even after reopening the economy, things haven't quickly returned to normal.

Recovery will be long, and even once lockdown and social distancing measures are fully over, it could be some time before major Western economies return to employment numbers that don't present an opportunity for extremists to take advantage of. The impact that COVID has had on major Western nations, as will be examined throughout this paper, is already giving opportunities to political extremists to radicalise, proselytise, and infiltrate.

## EXTREMISTS CAPITALISE ON ECONOMIC CATASTROPHES

It is well established that in times of economic crises, extremist political parties and organisations gain popularity. Economic uncertainty brings with it a multitude of socioeconomic issues that are exploited by extremists to advance radical agendas, normalise extremism, and present simple answers to complex questions.

In 2012, Kevin O'Rourke, Barry Eichengreen, and Alan de Bromhead examined data from 171 elections across 28 countries between 1919 and 1939, and demonstrated that economic hardship helped feed political extremism. The data found that "anti-system" parties, which were defined as parties that would change the system and function of government, were most successful in times of economic depression.<sup>16</sup>

Their study concluded that countries with recent histories of democracy, with existing "right-wing extremist parties," and with electoral systems that make it easier for smaller parties to succeed, were most likely to fall victim to extremist insurgencies. This paper will examine that while this is historically true, circumstances are now such that the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada may be vulnerable to extremism despite not meeting the three likely characteristics defined in the aforementioned study.

A 2015 paper by Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, and Christoph Trebesch also analysed average vote shares of far-right political parties five years before and after economic crises between 1919 and 2014. The data showed an increase in vote share from 6 percent to 10 percent<sup>17</sup> in these periods, showing that this is not just a historical trend. Economic crises have proven to be catalysts for extremist growth in elections throughout the 20th and into the 21st Century.

## CASE STUDY: THE 2008 CRASH AND THE BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY

The 2008 recession hit the United Kingdom hard. Employment fell by 580,000 between the beginning of 2008 and 2010, and affected men significantly more than women. Male employment fell by 3 percent while female employment fell by 0.7 percent.<sup>18</sup>

More specifically, young men were hit the hardest. At the time, people aged 16 to 24 made up some 19.5 percent of the population but made up 74 percent of the job losses.<sup>19</sup>

It proved an ideal breeding ground for extremists who preyed on the plight of young, white, working-class males—namely, the white nationalist British National Party, an offshoot of the white separatist National Front party that peaked during the recession of 1973. The National Front, a party that advocated the forceful repatriation of non-whites to protect the jobs of British workers and the racial identity of the British people, experienced its biggest electoral successes in the mid 1970s<sup>20</sup> and saw its support collapse as the economy recovered.

The BNP experienced a meteoric electoral rise during the 2008 crash. After adopting a localist election strategy in the new millennium, the party began winning dozens of local council seats off the back of a floundering Labour Party that appeared to be out of touch with the white working class. By addressing the fears of the white working class during a time of economic recession, particularly working-class men, the party won its first seat on the London Assembly in May 2008.<sup>21</sup> In 2009, the BNP won its first seats in the European Parliament.

Party leader Nick Griffin, along with former National Front chairman Andrew Brons, won seats representing Lancashire and Yorkshire, securing 943,598 votes nationally.<sup>22</sup> It shook British politics, forcing then-Prime Minister Gordon Brown to adopt the “British Jobs for British Workers” slogan made popular by the BNP, in an attempt at clawing back support from the white working class the party was quickly losing.

An out-of-touch Labour Party, which traditionally represented the working class, combined with a recession and unemployment crisis, gave the BNP a chance to flex its muscles. The party adopted a more moderate face, having ditched the NF-style forced repatriation policy and instead focusing entirely on stopping new immigration. It was the most successful far-right party in British history, and economic conditions played a major part in its historic (though, brief) rise.

The following data and graphs offer an insight into this phenomenon. It is split into two sets of data — European election results, and general election results. Those results are displayed alongside national unemployment percentage by year. There is wider context to consider when examining this data, including the well-established phenomenon of the British electorate being more generous with their vote in European elections than in general elections. In a European election, seats are assigned according to the d’Hondt system of proportional representation, meaning that minor (and sometimes extreme) parties have a greater chance of winning a seat than in the First-past-the-post system used in general elections.

For this reason and some others, the BNP enjoyed substantially more votes in European elections than general elections, but the trend maps out largely the same. The BNP began to grow before the economic crash, playing on the Labour Party’s weak immigration policy, and ultimately cashed in when the economic crash helped them make their case that immigration was hurting British workers.

Fig. 1: Votes for the BNP in General and European elections 1996-2015

Year	Unemployment Percentage	BNP Votes
1996	8.1	
1997	6.9	35832 <sup>23</sup>
1998	6.2	
1999	6	102647 <sup>24</sup>
2000	5.4	
2001	5.1	46851 <sup>25</sup>
2002	5.2	
2003	5	
2004	4.8	808200 <sup>26</sup>
2005	4.8	192745 <sup>27</sup>
2006	5.4	
2007	5.3	
2008	5.7	
2009	7.6	943598 <sup>28</sup>
2010	7.9	564331 <sup>29</sup>
2011	8.1	
2012	8	
2013	7.6	
2014	6.2	179694 <sup>30</sup>
2015	5.4	1,667 <sup>31</sup>

● General Election ● European Election

Fig. 2: BNP General Election Votes by Unemployment Percentage

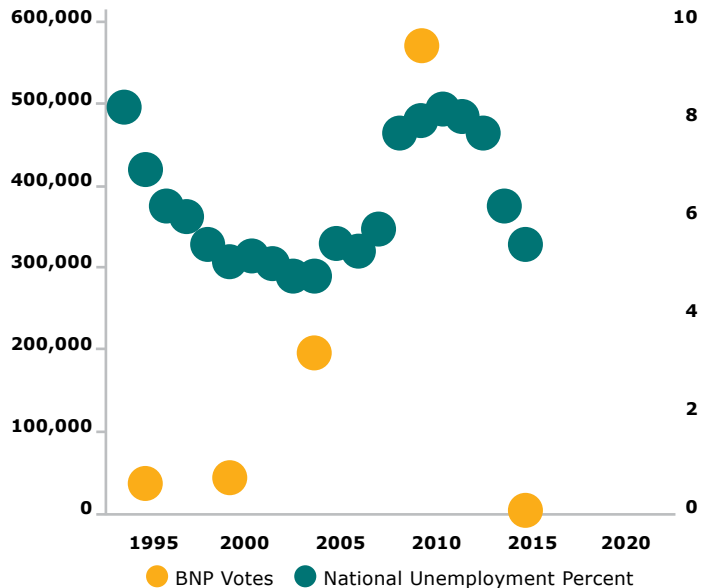
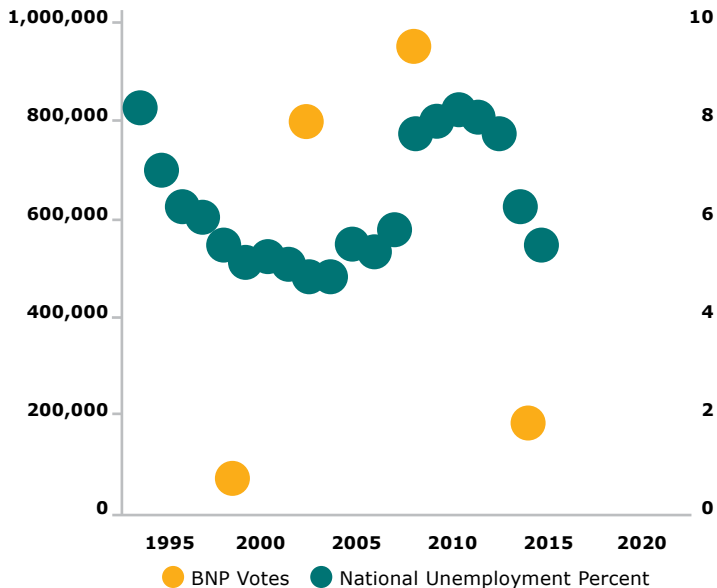


Fig. 3: BNP European Election Votes by Unemployment Percentage



## THE RADICAL LEFT SHIFTS FOCUS AND STRATEGY

Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch, 2015, identified a rise in electoral support for right-wing and far-right parties in times of economic crisis but found no evidence of a substantial rise in support for left-wing parties during these economic crises. Historically this has been true, but it did not analyse the impact of far-left radicals on popular culture and wider society during and after these economic crises.

At least following the 2008 crisis, far-left political parties and factions within established, mainstream political parties have become emboldened. Recognising just how close many Western countries came to seeing an irreversible rise in far-right electoral successes, radical socialists and Marxists translated their prowess as cultural trendsetters into becoming political movers. It resulted in the total reshaping of the left-wing Labour Party in the United Kingdom and the Democratic Party in the United States. It took time, but it happened, and was seen most clearly in between 2015 and 2019.

In 2015, veteran Marxist and ultra-socialist Member of Parliament Jeremy Corbyn was elected as leader of the Labour Party in a historic election win.<sup>32</sup> It transformed British politics for four years, led the party to two general election losses, but ultimately lurched the party further to the left on social and economic issues than it had been for decades. In the United States, the near success of independent socialist Senator Bernie Sanders in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries also shifted the platform of the Democratic party further left than it had ever been. Sanders' influence was so substantial that once-moderate Democratic senator Joe Biden appointed a senior Sanders economic adviser who advocates Modern Monetary Theory to his 2020 presidential campaign team.<sup>33</sup>

These shifts to the left took place some years after Western economies recovered from the 2008 crash, but show a shift in the way the hard left operates. This was the result of years of gradual tactical change. Traditionally unable to mobilise electoral support in times of economic crisis, hard-left influencers have taken control of mainstream, established political parties and movements across the Anglosphere. A COVID recession will be the far left's first major test in making political headway during a time of economic crisis since 2008, and the 2020 United States presidential election will indicate whether their transformation of mainstream left-wing parties has worked, and if it can attract sufficient electoral support.

## FAR-LEFT PROFITEERING FROM THE COVID RECESSION

For as long as the impact of the coronavirus lockdowns is felt, and for as long as there is economic disruption, far-left socialists and even revolutionary communists will continue to use the global economic crisis as a springboard to sell radical ideas. The “Whatever It Takes” approach adopted by Western governments, perhaps most notably the British government,<sup>34</sup> has given people a taste of what it’s like to be paid to stay at home.

It has also given far-left radicals an opportunity to ask people to imagine a life where the government does more.

Months into the coronavirus outbreak, it is clear that power is being wielded by far-left radicals on social media and even in mainstream politics in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada.

## NOVARA MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA PERMEATION OF “ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING”

British far-left online media platform Novara Media used its significant online presence to push for a fundamental restructuring of Western economies as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. Novara Media was co-founded by Aaron Bastani, author of “Fully Automated Luxury Communism”, in 2011.

The platform boasts hundreds of thousands of followers across multiple social media accounts. It has a global audience, and its contributors are regularly invited onto British television news programmes. Its best-known contributors are Ash Sarkar and Aaron Bastani.

Fig. 4: Social Media Following of Far-Left Media Outlet Novara Media and Its Contributors

Social Media Account	Follower Count (As of July 2020)
Aaron Bastani, Twitter	83.3k <sup>35</sup>
Novara Media, Twitter	124k <sup>36</sup>
Ash Sarkar, Twitter	266.6k <sup>37</sup>
Novara Media, YouTube	86.2k <sup>38</sup>
Novara Media, Facebook	81k <sup>39</sup>

In a March 12th discussion on the Novara Media YouTube channel on March 12th, 2020, host Michael Walker listed some of the British government’s extensive economic measures taken to reduce the impact of COVID-19 lockdown measures. These included a £5bn emergency response fund for the National Health Service and public services in England, a contributory Employment Support Allowance for the self-employed, and a GBP£500 M hardship fund for local councils across England to help vulnerable communities. Walker also referenced “business interruption loans” of

up to GBP£1.2 M for small companies and the abolishment of business rates in England for retail, leisure, and hospitality sectors with rateable values below GBP£51,000.

These were some of the most extensive measures ever taken by any British government to support businesses, but all three Novara panelists in the video did not think it was sufficient. James Meadway, a left-wing economist, said the provision was “not enough to deal with the scale of the crisis.”<sup>40</sup>



Days later, Meadway published an op-ed on the Novara Media website arguing that coronavirus “will require us to completely reshape the economy”. Meadway was formerly an advisor to Labour Party Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell MP who had served as Shadow Chancellor under the leadership of veteran socialist Jeremy Corbyn. He was widely recognised as one of the most extreme socialists in the Labour Party,<sup>41</sup> so it is perhaps not surprising that Meadway would use the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to pitch a socialist economic revolution in the wake of Corbyn’s catastrophic fall from grace.

In his March 16th column, Meadway argued that the impending COVID recession is different from the 2008 crash because, this time, it “threatens the most fundamental institution of all in capitalism: the labour market itself”. In the piece, he argued that the way in which coronavirus lockdown measures force workers to stay at home proves a fundamental restructuring of the capitalist system is necessary. He also argued that the increasing frequency of pandemics and climate change necessitate this restructuring permanently.

“The economic tools currently being brought to bear by governments to deal with this—such as the British government’s pathetic fiscal package (£1bn to support workers off sick, but £2.1bn in total for pension tax cuts)—won’t be enough, but nor will even this evening’s 2008-style Federal Reserve intervention,” he wrote.<sup>42</sup>

Far-left radicals have substantial reach to promote the concept that capitalist economies *require* fundamental restructuring in response to the coronavirus. This message can be shared for as long as people feel the impact of lockdown, which in economic terms could go on until Q4 2021. Through social media channels, this message will permeate and could impact elections—including the 2020 United States Presidential Election.

## PUSHING FOR UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

Universal Basic Income is a proposed socialist government program that would redistribute wealth in the form of a universal income given to all citizens. It was already attempted in Ontario, Canada, in 2018. The Province gave 4,000 residents on a low income an annual stipend to spend how they like. Couples were granted CAD\$19,000 per year and individuals CAD\$13,000 per year. It was cancelled two years early. A similar project in Finland was tried in 2017 and wasn't renewed.<sup>43</sup>

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic increased discussion of Universal Basic Income dramatically in politics and the media across the Anglosphere.

A June 2020 study set out to ask whether there had been a "corresponding increase in support for the policy in the public at large".<sup>44</sup> Professor Daniel Nettle, a co-author of the report, wrote that, "Both in the UK and the USA, people were much more supportive of a UBI policy for the pandemic and its aftermath than they would have been in normal times". He explained that the effect "was large and held across ages, genders, and political orientations".

Using "fairly diverse samples of the UK and US population," the study found "substantial positive shifts in attitudes to UBI in the context of the pandemic and its aftermath". The researchers noted that the shifts were extremely similar in both countries, and were "not substantially different across the left-right political spectrum." This means two things.

First, it shows willingness from British and American citizens to adopt one of the most radical left-wing economic talking points of our time. Though the United Kingdom has a mixed economy and some history of socialist government, its modern economy is driven largely by capitalist endeavours. The economically liberal Conservative Party has been in government since 2010 and the New Labour government that preceded it was markedly different from the socialist Labour governments of the past. Despite this, the people of the UK as well as the US expressed a willingness to adopt one of the most radically socialist economic proposals around.

Secondly, it indicates that the COVID-19 outbreak could well be the opportunity that far-left radicals have been waiting for to sell an ultra-socialist agenda to the public.

## UBI IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The British government's "Whatever It Takes" approach put people more at ease with the concept of a universal basic income. A YouGov/NEON survey of 2,015 adults between 16th and 17th April 2020 showed just over half of the British public (51 percent) were supportive of

implementing a Universal Basic income scheme "where the government makes sure everyone has an income, without a means test or requirement to work". Notably, support didn't vary dramatically according to age.

Fig. 5: Support of Universal Basic Income.  
Results from a 16-17th April 2020 Survey by YouGov/NEON<sup>45</sup>

Degree of Support	Age Range Percentage			
	18-24	25-49	50-64	65+
Very Supportive	20	29	26	20
Supportive	24	25	27	29
<b>TOTAL SUPPORTIVE</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>49</b>
Neither Supportive nor Unsupportive	10	15	14	18
Unsupportive	16	12	16	17
Very Unsupportive	8	9	11	11
<b>TOTAL UNSUPPORTIVE</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>
DON'T KNOW	19	10	6	5

The seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted people to think differently, so much so that even as much as 39 percent of respondents who identified as Conservatives were supportive of such a measure.

More than 170 Members of Parliament and Peers (members of the House of Lords) called for the government to introduce an Emergency Universal Basic Income in a letter dated 19th March 2020.<sup>46</sup> This came at a time when the British government expressed willingness to do whatever it takes to protect the jobs and national economy, but before Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak announced the Conservative government's plan to cover 80 percent of monthly salary payments up to GBP£2,500.

The Emergency Universal Basic Income was proposed as a temporary measure but prompted wider discussion among politicians and political activists

about implementing something more permanently.

In the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, Sophie Howe, argued that climate change and COVID-19 meant the implementation of a Universal Basic Income was "urgent". Howe's role as the Future Generations Commissioner involves advising the Welsh government on matters that may affect future generations.

Howe claimed that the COVID-19 outbreak "laid bare" a series of problems including "wage poverty, racial disparity, imbalances in property ownership and quality of housing, job insecurity along with deep structural inequalities in the economy".

Howe also argued that "UBI is a very real solution to helping people out of poverty and aiding the economy, while reducing society's gaping inequalities which have grown deeper during this crisis".<sup>47</sup>

## UBI IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

In April, following the passing of bipartisan Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES), far-left Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib introduced a stimulus proposal, the “Automatic Boost to Communities Act”. Were it passed, the legislation would have guaranteed “every person” in the United States a U.S. Debit Card “pre-loaded with \$2,000 to every person in America”. The proposed legislation goes on to say each card would be “recharged with \$1,000 monthly until one year after the end of the Coronavirus crisis.” The legislation did not clearly define the “end of the Coronavirus crisis,” leaving the end of the program deliberately vague and open-ended. Legislators could argue that the end of the “Coronavirus crisis” would be a time when employment numbers returned to pre-COVID levels, which could take years, at which time every person in the United States would be guaranteed USD\$1,000 per month for a further year even after that.

The proposed legislation did, however, explain in detail what “every person” means. Tlaib’s policy document explained that “every person” includes “Non-citizens, including undocumented people, permanent residents, and temporary visitors whose stay exceeds three months”.<sup>48</sup> Tlaib proposed that the program would be funded by the Treasury, “using its legal authority to create money via coin seigniorage”, and that the Treasury Secretary “would direct the U.S. Mint to issue two \$1 trillion platinum coins”.<sup>49</sup>

Such measures were supported by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders, and a series of other high-profile Congressional Democrats. Former presidential candidate Andrew Yang expressed his delight<sup>50</sup> at the prospect of introducing UBI, as it was a key policy pledge throughout his failed 2020 campaign to obtain the Democratic nomination for president.

Similar attempts to give illegal immigrants access to emergency funding were made in Canada. Federal New Democratic Party leader urged Canada’s Prime

Minister to extend the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB) to more people, but most notably, to remove the jail penalties and heavy fines that were used as a deterrent to stop people who didn’t qualify from applying anyway.<sup>51</sup>

Earlier in May, the Government of Canada announced measures to make it easier for temporary foreign workers and international students to obtain CERB funds, too. The measures meant that government agents would no longer be required to obtain proof of a valid work permit from an applicant before granting the CERB payments.<sup>52</sup> It followed weeks of intense pressure from activist groups who argued that the CERB payments should be more readily accessible to immigrants.

In April, the Migrant Rights Network urged the federal government to issue illegal immigrant tax numbers and give them access to the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit. The group also urged the government to extend social insurance numbers of migrant workers that have expired, allowing those who have overstayed their visas or who are no longer entitled to government benefits access to CERB in the same way as citizens and legal temporary workers.<sup>53</sup>

On top of calls for illegal immigrants to be granted free money from the Canadian government, several academics fueled social media activists’ campaigns for the introduction of Universal Basic Income during the COVID outbreak and beyond. Professor Dionne Pohler, representing the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources at the University of Toronto, wrote that a basic income should be introduced “whether in a crisis or in good times”.<sup>54</sup>

Pohler was joined by several other academics in the March 18th piece that advocated a “Targeted Basic Income” in Canada that would involve direct payments of CAD\$1,000 per month to Canadians aged 18-65 who earn below CAD\$50,000.<sup>55</sup>

Canadian academics have toyed with the idea of a Universal Basic Income scheme for years. A 2017

report from the Northern Policy Institute argued that a Basic Income Guarantee would be “relatively easy” to implement, and ultimately recommended the Canadian government implement it. “The challenges are real, but so too are the costs of doing nothing”, the report claimed.<sup>56</sup> Those challenges, however, would likely be very substantial—ranging from enormous and ongoing expenditure and a total shift in how the Canadian (or American, or British) economies work, to entering totally unknown territory in terms of labour output, productivity, and general motivation among low earners. A 2017 report from the University of Manitoba Department of Economics shines a light on this, examining the lessons learned from the Manitoba Basic Annual Income experiments of the 1970s, known as “Mincome”.

The authors describe the conceptual lessons of the project, including the lack of insight on how such a project could work long term as a result of the short-term nature of the scheme.<sup>57</sup> And, despite the relatively short-term nature of the study, all income maintenance experiments showed a section of those participating in the scheme ultimately reduce their labour supply. Studies, including Mincome, consistently proved that these schemes were expensive and difficult to monitor, and ultimately saw a drop in labour supply from those who could afford to work less.

Advocating an economic system which is yet to be proven possible, and which presents the very real possibility of drastically reducing economic output and productivity on a national basis, is not a moderate position. It is an extremist policy proposal that is by no means new, but the willingness of major Western economies to spend billions on bailing out people and businesses has given traction to an idea that has long been considered unworkable, expensive, and potentially extremely damaging.

Coupled with concerted efforts to implement such a scheme in a way that allows even illegal aliens to access the free money, and it begs the question: who would pay for this?

Who *can* pay for this?

## MAINSTREAM PROPONENTS FOR ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING AND TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

COVID-19 presents an opportunity for radical left-wing activists, academics, and even politicians to completely reimagine society and do so in a way that appears compassionate and considerate. Major politicians, media figures, and activists have been unafraid to state, without hesitation or uncertainty, that they intend to use the damage caused by the outbreak to push forward with radical new visions for the future.

Using the new-found willingness of regular people concerned about their future to adopt radical new economic concepts, political operatives and influencers have set about publicly debating various new ideas about how society and Western economies should function.

Wendy Carlin, Professor of Economics at the University College London, said in April 2020 that “Like the Depression and the second world war, the Covid-19 pandemic will change how we talk about the economy and public policy.” She said it would be not just true in seminars and policy think-tanks, “but also in the vernacular with which people discuss their livelihoods”.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike the Depression and WWII, however, the COVID economy was self-inflicted and any subsequent recession artificial. Though the long-term effects are yet to be seen, the United States’ ability to boost employment by millions at the end of May and the beginning of June is testament to this fact. Any change in the way that people talk about the economy, therefore, is not the result of a long-term impact on national economies but opportunism from those who see it as an avenue for opening up discussion on economic policies so extreme that they were previously dismissed as unpopular and unworkable even to elected officials firmly of the left.

Carlin also wrote that COVID-19 could produce a “leftward shift on the one-dimensional government-versus-markets continuum of policy alternatives”,

and that a consequence of this change in thinking would be new approaches to public policy that “draw on values beyond compliance with government and individual gain”.

Malcolm Bull, a professor of art and the history of ideas at Oxford University, argued in a May column in *The Guardian* that “Coronavirus is our chance to completely rethink what the economy is for.”<sup>59</sup> Bull said that the pandemic has “revealed the danger of prizing ‘efficiency’ above all else”, and argued that the unpreparedness of Western economies for the COVID-19 outbreak highlighted a fatal flaw in just-in-time production lines. Bull failed to recognise, however, that a lack of preparedness does not signify a fault in Western capitalist economies but rather a failure of public officials to prepare. The 2009 Swine Flu outbreak and Ebola in 2014 should have been warning signs to governments to prepare, but seemingly all major Western governments failed to do so.

Citing the positive impact that millions of people staying at home for months has had on the environment, Bull suggested that the COVID outbreak is a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for change and renewal” that might mean a shorter working week, less air travel, or a “more fundamental remaking of our political system”.

Canadian author Naomi Klein expressed similar sentiment in a video published by Democracy Now, in which she theorises that the decision to bail out the airline industry may, somehow, benefit President Donald Trump personally.<sup>60</sup> The video, titled “Naomi Klein’s Case for Transformative Change Amid Coronavirus Pandemic,” uses clips of President Trump saying he had met with executives of health insurance companies during the COVID outbreak to imply the president was using the pandemic to end social security. She suggested that Trump would use the COVID economy to cancel elections and start “caging even more migrants”.



Klein's comments could be described as "gaslighting"—a form of manipulation designed to make other people doubt their own sanity. Klein tells viewers that right-wing politicians are using the outbreak to push ultra-liberal capitalism, before making her case for the extremist Green New Deal put forward by far-left Democrat congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Klein fundamentally misunderstands the *kind* of "right wing" activists and politicians who are really using the pandemic to their advantage. She also makes the case that measures taken by Western leaders to allow national economies to bounce back are actually extremist measures to marginalize immigrants and exploit workers. Never mind the millions of workers out of employment.

Through manipulation and strategic opportunism, Klein and others position the COVID outbreak as a problem caused by capitalism and one that can only be solved by extreme far-left policies that have for a long time been extremely unpopular with the general public. Suddenly, the Green New Deal and the crippling effect it would have on the airline industry may not seem so alien to millions of people who have been forced to stay at home for months. Being paid to stay at home is not so crazy anymore, when millions of Western workers have been living that reality since March.

The activism, the writing, and the proselytising of far-left ideologues and academics have translated into real-world politics. Former Vice President Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign is the first real test of this strategy.

In April, Biden strayed from his moderate image and revealed the radical agenda his campaign would soon adopt.

"I believe, because, sort of, the binders have been taken off, because of this COVID crisis, I think people are realising, 'My Lord, look at what is possible. Look at the institutional changes we can make,'" Biden said, before immediately backtracking slightly and adding, "without us becoming a 'socialist country', or any of that malarkey".

Despite this, Biden appointed an economic adviser who previously advised the Bernie Sanders campaign just the following month. Stephanie Kelton, an advocate of "Modern Monetary Theory"<sup>61</sup> sits on Biden's economy task force and is at the centre of the shift leftward of the once-moderate Democratic Party. Modern Monetary Theory theorises, as Kelton explains herself,<sup>62</sup> that the federal government should never worry about "finding the money in order to be able to spend" and that infrastructure programmes, investment in public services, and more, can all be paid for through quantitative easing.

Biden said there would be no socialist "malarkey" and yet his campaign team says otherwise.

In May, Biden repeated the claim and told a livestream audience that he believes there was an "incredible opportunity to not just dig out of this crisis, but to fundamentally transform the country".<sup>63</sup>

In June, the Biden camp started mapping out one of the most radical platforms for any Democratic presidential campaign in history. Biden's team began positioning the former vice president as a Roosevelt-like figure, campaigning on a modern New Deal that would transform the economy and lift people out of unemployment.

"We need some revolutionary institutional changes," Biden said in a podcast alongside Andrew Yang, the former Democratic candidate who championed Universal Basic Income.

The *Washington Post* reported that Biden's agenda "remains a work in progress"<sup>64</sup> but that he regularly confers with advisers, supporters, and far-left Democrats like Senator Elizabeth Warren. Former Mayor of Chicago and White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel said that while Biden once considered himself a "transition candidate" bridging the gap to the next generation, he now must think as a "transformational president".

Biden listened, announcing policies that completely disregard any prior promise of controlling the deficit, in true Modern Monetary Theory style.

Having beaten Bernie Sanders in the primaries, the COVID pandemic transformed the Democratic Party's moderate leader into Bernie Sanders. The only difference is that many voters still consider Joe Biden as the moderate-ish, wishy washy politician they've always known him to be.

Biden adds a moderate face to radical ideas, and combined with the widespread belief that he is exhibiting early signs of dementia and cognitive

decline, represents a sort of puppet candidacy for a mainstream American political party that has been taken over by far-left radicals. It is similar to the takeover of the British Labour Party by Corbyn campaign group "Momentum", but it will be the November presidential election before we know if this takeover will share a similar fate to Corbyn's Labour Party.

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE AS A COVER FOR RADICAL SOCIAL POLITICS

The COVID economy presents the far left with an opportunity to capitalise on an economic crisis more successfully than in other recent, historic economic crises. It is an opportunity not just to reshape the economy, but to use the groundswell of (albeit temporary) support of radical new economic ideas to reshape the nation-state too.

The COVID outbreak happened to coincide with a culture war that has been raging for at least the last ten years, but which has peaked since the Brexit vote and election of Donald Trump in 2016. Far-left radicals have normalized ideas about "white fragility" and "white privilege" to the point where governmental bodies and departments are sending white employees on courses to address their "racial bias".

In July, a whistleblower revealed how the United States Department of the Treasury was teaching employees that "virtually all" white employees "contribute to racism." The whistleblower provided training materials to Christopher Rufo, the Director of the Center of Wealth & Poverty, who wrote a Twitter thread<sup>65</sup> sharing the radical ideas being taught to government employees. The training documents, which were titled "Difficult Conversations About Race," encourages members of management to ask white employees to think about the race of their closest friends, and to acknowledge their natural bias against non-white people.

Just a decade ago, the idea that white people were inherently racist by nature was not a mainstream opinion or idea—because white people do not think in a collective way and do not share an inherent racism. But in 2019, Canada's Prime Minister admitted his own white privilege.<sup>66</sup> In 2020, Her Majesty's Opposition, the Labour Party of the United Kingdom, encouraged its Parliamentarians to kneel in solidarity with the extremist "Black Lives Matter" organisation.<sup>67</sup>

On July 5 2020, the *New York Times* filled up the entire "Sunday Review" section of its newspaper with a radical economic manifesto, not unlike the one put forward in the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force Recommendations document<sup>68</sup> used in Biden's presidential campaign. The manifesto, entitled "The Economy We Need," conflated economic issues with the so-called "racial justice" campaign that appeared in the wake of the death of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer.

The manifesto laid out plans for the Federal Reserve to focus specifically on black unemployment as the economy rebuilds, and not employment of people generally.<sup>69</sup> By nature, such an idea would put white people are a very immediate disadvantage.

"Instead of targeting overall unemployment, the Fed can correct its aim by targeting the Black unemployment rate," the manifesto reads. "If the Fed provides enough stimulus to bring down Black unemployment, everyone benefits".

Other demands outlined in the manifesto included:

- Eliminating banking fees for black customers;
- Providing interest-free mortgages to black home buyers;
- Providing interest-free loans to black-owned businesses;
- Cancelling consumer debt for black customers.

To be clear, this manifesto doesn't just propose making it easier for black entrepreneurs to start businesses or for black Americans to buy houses. It proposes eliminating the personal consumer debt of every single black American.

The political landscape is changing so rapidly and so significantly that ideas like this are considered mainstream by the biggest names in news media, and messages like this are being pushed by elected politicians, too.

Days later, Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar, a Democrat, addressed an outdoor press conference on the topic of criminal justice reform and the economy. Omar claimed that the American economy encompasses different systems of oppression and explained how she and her far-left colleagues believe they "can't stop at criminal justice reform or policing reform." The comments came in response to growing calls from her fellow Democrats to defund police departments across the United States in a measure to tackle what they perceive to be "systemic racism."

Omar said:<sup>70</sup>

"We are not merely fighting to tear down the systems of oppression in the criminal justice system. We are fighting to tear down systems of oppression that exist in housing, in education, in health care, in employment, [and] in the air we breathe.

...

"As long as our economy and political systems prioritise profit without considering who is profiting, who is being shut out, we will perpetuate this inequality...So we cannot stop at [the] criminal justice system. We must begin the work of dismantling the whole system of oppression wherever we find it."

The pandemic came at the ideal for far-left radicals who have advocated policies like these, including spending trillions of dollars on reparations in the United States,<sup>71</sup> but who have seen limited success in terms of electoral support.

Far-left radicals have cleverly politicized the tragic death of George Floyd, incited riots across the Western world under the pretense of fighting injustice, and conflated these extremist ideas with similarly radical economic policies that they know voters may be more likely to support during an unprecedented economic crisis like this. This will play a hand in reciprocal extremism, and whether it pays off for the Democrats in the November presidential election, it will serve as ammunition for far-right extremists who are also looking to profit off this crisis.

## SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM PROSPECTS

Should Biden win the November presidential election, it will change the historic trend of voters shifting support to far-right parties in times of economic crises. Notably, however, there are substantial similarities between the left-wing populism of the new Democratic Party in the United States and the far-right parties of history. This is a party suddenly willing to spend whatever it takes to get as many people back into work as possible, albeit supporting illegal immigrants at the same time, and expanding public programmes beyond their limited implementations in America and even beyond the programmes seen in mixed economies in Europe.

The long-term success of far-left radicals in implementing their promised transformative change depends greatly on Biden's performance in November, but also on the length of time it takes for the effect of the COVID outbreak to be felt by most people. Across the UK, USA, and Canada, the time that people continue feeling the impact of mass unemployment is the window in which far-left radicals can pitch their ideas. The moment unemployment grows in a meaningful way—where most people are in work or have an opportunity to re-enter the workforce—the pitch becomes more difficult. It is hard to make people imagine something utterly transformative when they are happy with a functioning capitalist economy that high standards of living.

Disrupting economic growth and rebuilding of the economy as nations enter lockdown, therefore, is in the interest of far-left ideologues. Propaganda from Naomi Klein and others, which heavily implies Western leaders are using COVID and economic recovery packages as a way of exploiting workers, become immediately transparent when viewed through this lens. The successful rebuilding of Western capitalist economies could immediately crush this surprising far-left insurgency.

The short-term success of far-left radicals depends on the length of time it takes for a successful COVID-19 vaccine to be developed and distributed globally, allowing economies to return entirely to normal.

Their long-term success depends partially on the results of the November U.S. presidential election, and their ability to disrupt economy recovery in the time it takes for a COVID vaccine to be delivered.

## OPPORTUNISM FROM THE FAR RIGHT, AND WHAT THE AUTHORITIES GET WRONG

Far-left radicals are particularly active during the COVID economy precisely because they are aware that the far right exists, and that traditionally this side of the political spectrum has been more capable of capitalising on economic crises. The potential long-term damage caused by lockdown measures prompted by the COVID outbreak is ideal for far-right activists to recruit in the long term. In the short term, the lockdown measures themselves are conducive to radicalising young, white, working-class men.

As many outlets, researchers, and pundits have noted, the lockdown has seen more people stuck at home and engaging with people online. While this is a very real problem, it is by no means the biggest threat posed by the far right.

The far right exists but is often greatly exaggerated or badly defined. Democratic populists who present themselves in angry and undignified ways may be abhorrent to many, but they are vastly different in their outlook to the white nationalists and white supremacists who represent the far right. The inability to distinguish between these groups of people causes a great deal of confusion on this topic, but for some, this is by design.

It is in the interest of far-left ideologues at such an unpredictable and unstable time to cause as much division and uncertainty as possible. This is perhaps the reason why so many Western journalists and commentators produced reports detailing how the far right is using the coronavirus as a campaigning tool. Many of these reports conflated white nationalists with populists and addressed surface-level concerns relating to campaign efforts during the COVID outbreak. Few recognised the more serious and long-lasting impact the COVID economy can have in enabling the growth of extreme-right political parties.

As economic crises present greater opportunities for the far-right to disseminate effective propaganda and grow their electoral base, the COVID economy should be of great concern to policy makers, to those in government, and to any single person looking forward to better economic times. In this slow and gradual incline to better times, genuine far-right extremists could have ample opportunity to cash in on the concerns of young, white working-class men. This will be amplified if politicians refuse to even acknowledge the impact on this community by the COVID recession for reasons of political correctness. It is entirely possible that we will, through the rest of the 2020 financial year and into 2021, see politicians and people in varying levels of power focusing their efforts on minority communities, and using uncertainty in this COVID economy to throw weight behind the idea of equity, and not equality. If this economic recovery is not weighted equally and involves continued demonisation of young, white, working-class men, then there may be a similar rise in far-right politics to what was seen in 2008.

This threat should be evident to anybody who can remember what happened 12 years ago, and yet journalists and academics continue to focus on trivial examples of radical activists making insignificant campaign efforts on the topic of the pandemic itself, rather than how the far right could use the serious damage being done to Western economies to its advantage.

## HIGHLIGHTING TRIVIAL FAR-RIGHT ACTIVITY DURING THE COVID OUTBREAK

Both populist and far-right groups have used the COVID outbreak to attract attention to their political activism and ideas, which has prompted various reports by journalists and researchers. This, however, is not unique to the right. A viral outbreak of this size, which has impacted the lives of billions of people, has not been ignored by any political group. The idea, therefore, that political activism focused on the COVID outbreak is an immediate cause for concern if it comes from conservatives, democratic populists, or even far-right groups, is not well-thought-out.

Trivial political activism that has had extraordinarily little impact on public discourse has been the focus of several reports.

Hope Not Hate, a left-wing political activist group that targets right-wing political opponents, published commentary that highlighted how some anti-Islam activists pushed an “anti-lockdown narrative”. The organisation referenced populists as well as far-right white nationalists, as if they were the same, and quoted comments made in social media groups about the holocaust. “6 million Jews was totally a lie, just like we are being lied to about the COVID 19 statistics”, one comment reads.<sup>72</sup>

Beyond the lack of distinction between populists (who some people may find unpleasant) and far-right activists (who advocate white supremacy, race hatred, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories), Hope Not Hate’s focus on comments like this misses the bigger picture. That is unless Hope Not Hate has data suggesting that comments comparing COVID 19 to the Holocaust have had any measurable effect on public opinion, or that it has changed the minds of significant numbers of people online. It seems unlikely that such a comment would come from somebody who didn’t already believe the Holocaust was a lie before the COVID outbreak, or that a non-political person was active in this private social media group and had their mind changed

by the comment. If it did, some data or deeper analysis would be interesting to see.

A June report published in The Telegraph, titled “How the far right is using Covid-19 as cover to spread propaganda”, used weak examples of far-right groups using the pandemic as a talking point in stickers that appeared on lampposts around London. The report revealed that an anonymous online activist group known as the “Hundred Handers” had distributed stickers that read “pubs closed, borders open”.<sup>73</sup>

It’s a message many Brits might reasonably connect with and are already talking about, but not a message that really permeated enough to make the “Hundred Handers” a household name. The stickers have had no observable impact on public discussion, most people won’t have seen them, and even fewer people will have heard of the group behind them.

The report goes on to tell stories of how virtual LGBT events were targeted during an online campaign known as “Operation Pridefall”. It happened, but it is by no means a unique phenomenon—in fact, the sudden rise in the use of videoconferencing apps during lockdown gave rise to a trend called “Zoombombing”. Virtual classrooms and boardrooms were targeted by networks of trolls, where purposely provocative material was interjected into video calls with the goal of shocking attendees and filming their reactions.<sup>74</sup> Pranksters and trolls use everything from Nazi imagery to homosexual pornography to disrupt the meetings. If this was a legitimate attempt at spreading far-right propaganda, it was unsophisticated. Young school children who were targeted, and stern members of boardrooms meetings, were unlikely to be converted to far-right politics through these pranks.



A June 2 report from the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right asked, “Is the Radical Right Spreading the Coronavirus?”. Dr Miranda Christou claimed that the “radical right” (which in this case lazily conflates white nationalists and neo-Nazis with democratic populists) views scientists as having no authority to speak on matters like viral outbreaks. Christou also argued that the far-right doesn’t believe the pandemic exists, incorrectly asserting that President Donald Trump labeled the pandemic a “hoax”. This claim comes from a speech the president gave in South Carolina on February 28, 2020, in which he labeled the Democrats’ efforts to impeach him “their new hoax”.

It is popular to claim that conservatives, populists, and white nationalists on the most extreme fringe of the right are pushing a narrative that the pandemic is not real. While some undoubtedly do believe the COVID-19 pandemic is no more than a bad flu, this is not a point of view unique to the right, or to the far right. According to a Marist poll conducted March 13-14, 2020, 41 percent of independents believe the COVID pandemic is being “blown out of proportion”. Some 54 percent of Republicans believed the same, and 20 percent of Democrats.<sup>75</sup> Overall, 56 percent of Americans considered the virus a real threat and 38 percent said it was not. The idea that the COVID-19 virus is not as big a threat as some experts say is, by any definition, a mainstream opinion.

Think tanks and researchers, as well as the media and journalists, have presented a narrative that the coronavirus has generated a wave of new far-right activity. However, without evidence that shows how trivial comments made in private social media groups have had a meaningful effect on public opinion or radicalised people who weren’t otherwise political or extreme, it’s hard to consider some of these examples as cause for immediate concern.

In other cases, researchers have propagandised the pandemic, as well as the divided public opinion on how it should be handled, to paint a picture of an immediate far-right threat. This is a half-truth. While there have undoubtedly been examples of far-right activity during the COVID pandemic, many of the examples depicted in the media and in papers are thoroughly underwhelming and significantly less alarming than the threat posed by the long-lasting economic damage of lockdown. The uncertain economic landscape poses a more meaningful, substantial, and long-term threat in terms of far-right radicalisation and recruitment than activists putting stickers on lampposts and shop windows.

The 2008 crash, and the historical data analysed at the beginning of this report, show how far-right organisations and parties are capable of riding waves of economic uncertainty.

The COVID economy poses a real threat to Western nations. Rather than using this pandemic to grandstand left-wing virtue and moral superiority over COVID deniers, it would be wise to acknowledge this threat, learn from history, and take preemptive action.

## LONGER-TERM OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE FAR RIGHT IN THE COVID ECONOMY

In a commentary piece for the Royal United Services Institute, a British defence and security think tank, Claudia Wallner and Dr Jessica White argue that the far right is using COVID-19 as an opportunity to shut the borders or restrict immigration.<sup>76</sup> This is a good example of academics confusing populists and national conservatives with white nationalists and white supremacists—or “the right” and “the far right”. Examples given by the two authors include Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s comments drawing links between the pandemic and illegal migration, and the decision made by President Donald Trump to suspend some visas during the outbreak. In the example of the United States, President Trump’s decision to halt immigration was not based on race or identity, nor was it permanent. It was a temporary order signed by the president to reduce the number of employment-based visas at a time when the country has millions of Americans unemployed. It is an economic decision that doesn’t discriminate based on any characteristics relating to racial identity. Before the COVID economy and mass unemployment, President Trump publicly pondered the possibility of increasing immigration as the United States economy was doing so well.<sup>77</sup> A far-right decision this was not.

In the case of Viktor Orban, the link between illegal immigration and the spread of COVID-19 is clear. Legal immigrants in major economies, if they are allowed to enter the country at all, are subject to tests upon entry or have access to the health system. Illegal immigrants are not subject to the same test or do not have access to a health system in the same way or to the same extent as legal citizens or residents.

The suggestion that COVID-19 is enabling far-right policies right now is arguably very weak. It is an extension of media reports which suggest the presence of stickers is an immediate cause for concern, or that social media posts prove that the far right is a threat in its present form. This is a

weak analysis. Data from historic economic crises show that the far right benefits in times of economic crises, and reports of minor far-right activity online or on the streets is significant not for the reasons outlined by the reports scrutinised in this paper, but because they prove the existence of a workable base from which a greater movement can grow.

In the same way that we saw the rise of the British National Party post-2008 into a viable and mainstream political force in the United Kingdom, the COVID economy presents an opportunity for *uncoordinated* groups and lone actors in the far-right space to become organised. Minor political parties will have the opportunity to grow, and online activists in forums and on social media platforms will use the COVID economy and unemployment crisis as a chance to recruit. In the same way that far-right activists presented their views as moderate during and after the 2008 crash, some of the most radical, anti-Semitic, and race-focused ideologues online will have bigger (and captive) audiences.

Lockdown measures mean people are spending more time online.<sup>78</sup> Reports also suggest that lockdown measures are hitting under-25s the hardest in times of employment and the general economic fallout.<sup>79</sup> These findings resulted in several counter-extremism outfits reporting that the increased time spent online by young people meant extremists had greater opportunity to radicalise.<sup>80</sup> This is true, but real-world grievances are the keystone to radicalisation, and without them, comments made by extremists online are little more than just insignificant ramblings. Young people spending more time online represents merely a channel in which extremists can radicalise, but the prospects of long-term unemployment problems present a keystone for the arguments of these extremists. Without legitimate grievances, and without the ability to point to real-world events driving those grievances, the influence of genuine far-right extremists would remain at base levels.

Sara Khan, the Lead Commissioner for the British Home Office's Commission for Countering Extremism, came close to understanding this when she said, "We've seen how extremists have exploited the pandemic, and my concern long-term is that we're going to see significant increases in unemployment and local authorities with financial black holes. There is going to be anger and resentment, and extremists will seek to exploit that".<sup>81</sup>

This is precisely what is happening. There is room to argue that the Commission for Countering Extremism gets some fundamentals wrong, but the fact that this principle is recognised in the first place is significant. Extremism doesn't occur in a void, and radicals attempting to use COVID as a recruitment tool when there are no real-world effects that can be directly linked to their conspiracy theories, will be met with minimal success. As soon as those effects are real, however, white nationalists are presented with the opportunity to offer simple solutions and answers to those complex problems and questions. Extreme-right activists can say that mass immigration, and the refusal of politicians to talk about how it affects working-class communities, is a Jewish conspiracy. It answers a lot of the questions young, white working-class men (for the most part) will have—albeit incorrectly. But to provide easy answers to complicated questions, there must first be questions.

In the time of the COVID economy, those questions may be, "why am I unemployed, are immigrant workers affected the same as me, and are the politicians doing enough for working-class communities like mine?"

Beyond fearmongering about temporary immigration moratoriums that are imposed primarily to answer the concerns working-class people have about unemployment during the COVID economy, Western leaders must now ask what they can do to stop genuine white supremacists claiming authority on these issues. What opportunities does the COVID economy present to the far right, beyond unimpactful political stunts, and what can the lasting impacts of lockdown offer to extreme groups on the right?

## THE IMPACT ON YOUNG, WORKING-CLASS, AND NON-UNIVERSITY-EDUCATED WORKERS

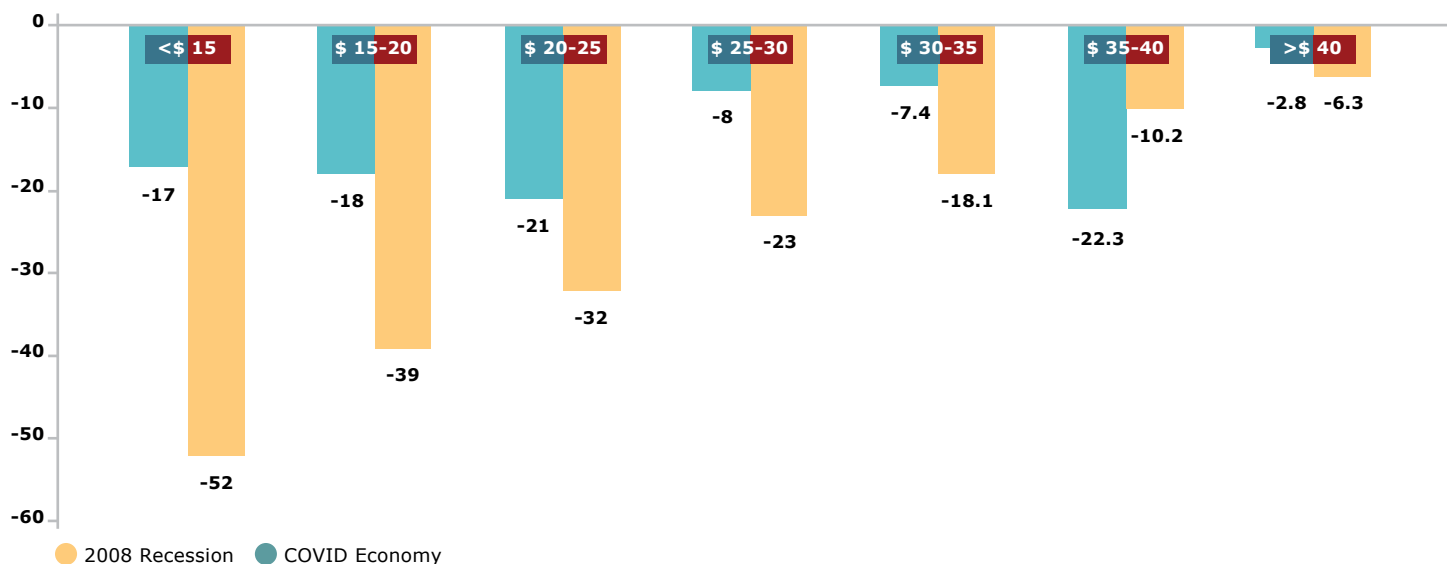
As Matthew Goodwin noted in “New British Fascism”, the British National Party in the run-up to, and during, the 2008 crash began attracting more young, working-class men. Goodwin noted that most young Britons were “increasingly unlikely to support parties which are associated with open racism and prejudice” because of exposure to mass immigration, but in the same vein, that exposure to mass immigration meant that less-educated, young, working-class men were still susceptible to embracing the extreme right.<sup>82</sup>

It is easy to assume that being less educated means an attraction to the far-right is a result of a lack of information. It may, however, be just the opposite. “The Perception Gap,” a June 2019 study, analysed how different sides of the political spectrum view their ideological opposites. The study asked Democrats and Republicans what political opinions they understood their political opponents to hold, and it found that university educated people are more likely to attribute opinions to their opponents that they do not in fact hold. Non-university-educated people were more capable of describing the views of their opponents,

while university educated Democrats in particular were most incapable of accurately describing the views of Republicans.<sup>83</sup>

It described how, by the time a Democrat receives a postgraduate degree, they have a “Perception Gap” of 34 percentage points and how with each new degree that person obtains that gap increased by a further 4 percentage points. In short, it showed that university educated people—leftists, in particular—are more incapable of accurately describing the views of those on the right. Education, therefore, is not a good indicator of a person’s ability to recognise or understand the political environment. The fact that young, working-class, and less-educated people are more *likely* to turn to the far right is not necessarily an indicator of stupidity but instead an ability to recognise a problem and not having access to moderate political outlets willing to address those problems. If far-right extremists are willing to be that outlet, then the COVID economy presents an opportunity for activists to recruit on the same issues they did in 2008—unemployment, national identity, culture, and poverty.

Fig. 6: Percentage of Hours Lost During 2008 Recession/COVID Economy By Wage (Canada)



Note: Weekly hours lost for primary jobs. Data from September 2008 to April 2009 and February 2020 to April 2020, analysed by Mikal Skuterud. Earnings are adjusted for inflation. Source: *The Star*/Labour Force Survey (PUMFS).<sup>84</sup>

The COVID economy bears some similarities to the 2008 crash. Young, low-wage workers were hit hard in that recession, but the COVID economy hit low-wage workers even harder. In Canada, low-wage workers lost significantly more hours during lockdown between February and April 2020 than they did in 2008.

Also in Canada, unemployment or lost hours affected non-unionized women the hardest, though the trend showed that low-wage people generally were more affected by job losses, as well as non-homeowners.

In the UK and Europe, layoffs during lockdown primarily impacted non-university-educated workers. Research showed that 80 percent of workers facing lost hours, pay cuts, or permanent layoffs, did not have university degrees.<sup>85</sup>

The same impact has been seen in the United States, where those working in retail and brick-and-mortar stores have been impacted most when it comes to job losses or hours lost. Retail workers and those employed in the food and service industries make up roughly 26 million Americans,<sup>86</sup> and have faced the greatest job uncertainty through the COVID crisis.<sup>87</sup> Like in Canada where this impact was also felt among young women, immigrants in the United States have also been hit hard by these job losses owing to the fact that many work in brick-and-mortar stores, restaurants, and industrial environments. This is where there is some substantial difference to the 2008 crash, in that the service industry didn't collapse in this way. The fact that many immigrants in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom are likely to have experienced similar job losses to white, working-class men could potentially put a dampener on efforts by far-right extremists to use this situation to recruit—but there is more to this story.

As economies rebuild, there will be a legitimate concern about the supply of jobs, at least in the short term. Any refusal by politicians to accept that immigration reform may become necessary, again at least in the short term, will immediately be used by far-right extremists because it is hard to defend. When jobs are in short supply, the citizen workers in the national economy will reasonably expect to be prioritized for that work.

Another factor at play is the left-right culture war.

## RECIPROCAL EXTREMISM AND THE CULTURE WAR

The similarities between the COVID economy and the 2008 crash mean far-right extremists will have an opportunity, as they have had in dozens of economic crises over at least the last century, to capitalise on very real troubles facing the white working class—in particular, white working-class men.

The differences between the COVID economy and the 2008 crash, including the likelihood that immigrants will suffer much in the same way as the white working class, are more than made up for by the quite extraordinary nature of the culture war being raged by radical Marxists at the helm of organisations like Black Lives Matter, in Congress and in Parliament, and in the media.

And, if politicians continue to adopt the radical policies of the far left—or even entertain ideas like focusing solely on black unemployment and cancelling black debt—then the arguments made by white nationalists will be legitimised in the

eyes of young, working-class men (and some women) who are spending more time online, looking for answers that explain the world around them. When mainstream politicians and even the potential next president of the United States, and the Prime Minister of Canada, are actively working in the interests of minority communities instead of the nation as a whole, it creates a you-versus-them atmosphere on a national level.

The adoption of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s “Green New Deal” by Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden<sup>88/89</sup> is a sign that mainstream politicians are taking radical ideas seriously. The COVID economy is proving fertile ground for far-left radicals to gain momentum and infiltrate their “economic justice” plans into mainstream politics, and it may be more likely to sew division and lend legitimacy to the arguments of the far right than achieve any kind of justice whatsoever.

## THE RECIPE FOR RADICALISATION

Extremism typically does not occur in a void. While some people are naturally drawn to extreme groups or politics for the sense of community it may offer, those people are small in number. However, the ability of extreme political parties and organisations to escape the fringe and grow in times of economic crises suggests that in order for these groups to grow there must be a keystone that holds them up structurally in terms of numbers, but also ideologically.

Professor Randy Borum of the University of South Florida proposed a four-stage model for the emergence of a terrorist mindset.<sup>90</sup> While extremists and terrorists are not necessarily the same thing, the model can be applied to both violent and non-violent extremists. It describes how grievances or vulnerabilities turn into targeted hatred of a group.

He proposes the first stage as the experience of an “unsatisfying event, condition, or grievance” which moves on to a feeling of injustice in the second stage. In the third stage, the party the individual deems responsible for the grievance then becomes a target, which moves on to the demonisation of those targets either through various hate crimes or violence and terrorism.

In this COVID economy, the first stage—the grievance—is unemployment. The second stage is seeing non-citizens/immigrants either continuing their work, or noticing a backlash from high-profile figures, politicians, and the media against a temporary immigration moratorium. Outside of the United States, it might even be the refusal of politicians to implement any temporary immigration moratorium, or reform, at all.





It is easy to assume that the third stage involves the targeting of immigrants or non-white people, and while it is often the case, the target attribution is not exclusively applied to immigrants. Far-right extremists will blame the politicians, the media, and far-left activists for the negative impact of the COVID economy on white working-class communities. By stage four, people who may have otherwise not been political at all have experienced an unsatisfying event, felt injustice, attributed blame to people who may or may not be responsible, and in the worst scenarios, begun violently targeting those considered responsible or started withdrawing from normal society and engaging with extremists online.

The logic holds up, but there might also be more to this. It's easy to assume that the grievance felt by an individual is not a real grievance, and that the directing of blame that comes in stage two and three is unfair. This is not necessarily the case. Unemployment is by no means an easy experience for anybody. If that unemployment is largely affecting people in low-skilled work then the continued influx of new workers who will compete with the country's existing population for jobs as the economy rebuilds will only add to that problem.

Once the economy starts to rebuild the issue changes dramatically, and the debate surrounding immigration reform or policy reverts back to

the same old variables. However, in the COVID economy, those variables are entirely different and to assume that the grievances felt by young, working-class people are either non-existent or illegitimate is wrong. The fact that these grievances are real means that stages two and three can result in people directing blame towards people who *are* responsible for this—but opportunism from existing far-right extremists presents an opportunity for that anger to be misdirected. This is where the opportunism comes in.

With that keystone grievance, extremists can reach people online and offer simple answers to complicated questions about the economy and immigration. Recognising this grievance is key to understanding radicalisation, which is why scaremongering over unpleasant comments made on Facebook comparing the holocaust to the COVID outbreak is not productive. Radicalisation is rooted in grievance. In order to win over large groups of people, extremist groups must find a legitimate grievance—or even a perceived legitimate grievance—to hold up their newly-expanding movements. For Black Lives Matter, it is the notion that white police officers are hunting down black criminals and that the institutions are systemically racist. The data on these issues does not matter, as the footage of the tragic death of George Floyd and other tragedies involving black victims is often enough to rally huge numbers in opposition.

In the example of the far right, the keystone has remained fairly consistent in all Western nations. It is a combination of large-scale immigration being promoted by politicians often in a way that white working-class communities do not consider beneficial, a willingness from the media condemn critics of immigration as racist, and campaigns by hard-left radicals to condemn the white working-class if they voice their opposition to large-scale immigration or radical progressive politics that condemn “whiteness”. This has been the recipe for far-right radicalisation for decades, though in the age of COVID, the activism of the far left has merged with the decisions made by the politicians and the articles published by the mainstream media.

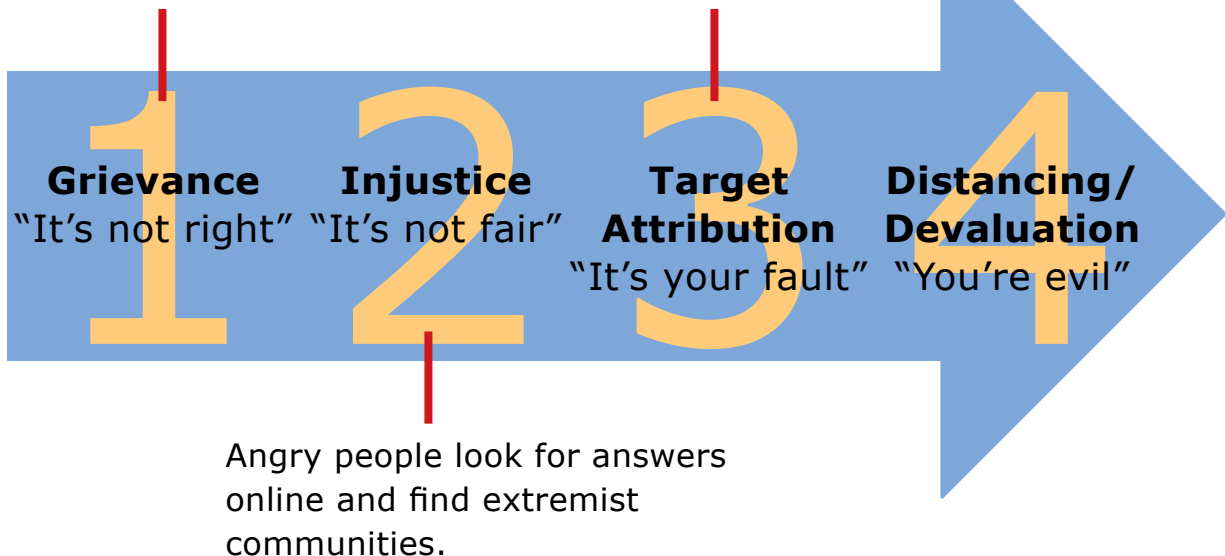
BBC Radio and television series normalise the concepts of “whiteness”<sup>91</sup> and “white privilege”,<sup>92</sup> and a recent BBC podcast promoted the use of the slur “Karen”, which was adopted by far-left radicals as a smear of white women in early 2020.<sup>93</sup> The CBC does the same in Canada,<sup>94</sup> and has been

doing so since at least 2014.<sup>95</sup> In the United States, media outlets are completely unafraid to level the accusation of “racism” at President Donald Trump and his supporters for even mentioning topics like immigration, even when it comes to the decision to temporarily restrict immigration during the COVID economy for the sake of protecting jobs and American workers.

When far-right extremists declare that there is a war against white people, it is hard for those at the receiving end of the vitriol to disagree—namely white men. If the far right can be right about this, and if they can at least show that they are willing to address difficult issues like immigration and fighting back against “woke” radical progressive culture, then young white men looking for answers could soon find themselves trusting those same extremists to be right about more things. Part of the blame for this must be placed on the institutions that demonise young white men to the extent that fringe politics become attractive.

- Unwillingness to discuss immigration during rapid and extreme loss of low-skilled jobs.
- Far-left demonisation of white working class.

Far-right extremists blame non-white people and Jewish conspiracies.



If we combine this process with Borum's four-stage model, we can see the point at which extremists take advantage of legitimate grievances and inject extremist ideas presented as answers to those grievances.

The model exposes how accessibility to ideas plays a role in radicalisation. If politicians or the media are unwilling to address difficult issues that affect working-class communities, it provides an opportunity to far-right extremists to fill that gap. These communities are easily accessible online through many mainstream social media platforms, as well as various websites and forums.

At the "Target Attribution" stage, far-right extremists are presented with an opportunity to introduce conspiracy theories as answers to legitimate grievances on the basis that they were right about the initial grievance, and new recruits have little reason not to trust them to be right about more. By nature of being some of the only communities willing to talk about anti-white propaganda or other difficult political topics, far-right extremists have an opportunity to introduce curious and often vulnerable people to extremist ideas about race and global Jewish conspiracy theories.

This is a perfect storm. With more people at home and looking for answers online, with a struggling job market and a political class condemning the idea of even temporarily restricting immigration to protect jobs, and with a cult of woke radical progressives continuing to take aim at the white working class, far-right activists have more ammunition than they did in 2008, than they did in the 1970s in Great Britain, and than at many other times of significant economic crisis in history. This is a recipe for radicalisation, and it should be of greater concern to the West's political leaders than a small far-right organisation putting stickers on lampposts in London.

## ACKNOWLEDGING RECIPROCAL EXTREMISM

Accepting the fact that grievances used by the far-right to recruit are real to the people feeling them is one thing. To accept that these grievances are often real, however, one must accept the existence of reciprocal extremism and be willing to address the far-left radicalism outlined earlier in this paper.

Often academics will completely ignore the existence of far-left radicalism. This is also true of the media and also of many mainstream politicians—a result of mainstream politics' embrace of far-left radicalism in the West. The commentary from the Royal United Services Institute referenced earlier in this paper which analyses how "extremist groups across the ideological spectrum are capitalizing on the uncertainty created by the pandemic" is a good example of this.<sup>96</sup> While the commentary piece addresses the important point of how extremists are taking advantage of the *uncertainty* in the COVID economy and not just the outbreak itself, it fails to recognise the existence of far-left extremists. The piece focuses on Islamists and far-right groups, but doesn't once mention how far-left activists, politicians, and even media outlets are using the COVID-19 outbreak as an opportunity to advocate for extreme economic ideas and race-based policy.

Similarly, the lead commissioner of the British government's Commission for Countering Extremism, Sara Khan, appears to miss the mark on addressing reciprocal extremism and even recognising the existence of far-left radicals. In June, Khan noted how far-right extremists have promoted a "racist extremist narrative" in response to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. While this statement is true, Khan also implied that the Black Lives Matter movement is not an extremist movement.

"They've been promoting racist extremist narratives, encouraging and inciting hate," Khan said of far-right extremists in Britain. "Certain far-right actors have been claiming that the Black Lives Matter movement is a war against all white people."

She said this despite the fact that Black Lives Matter is an avowed revolutionary Marxist organisation that is responsible for widespread riots across the United States, as well as protests and the defacing of statues in the United Kingdom and Canada. In June, Black Lives Matter representative Hank Newsome told Fox News that his organisation will "burn down" the American system if they don't get what they want.<sup>97</sup>

In July, a social media post from Black Lives Matter Toronto co-founder Yusra Khogali revealed how she believes white people are "sub-human" and "recessive genetic defects".<sup>98</sup>

To dismiss the claim that Black Lives Matter is an anti-white organisation is to dismiss a legitimate grievance and to misunderstand the nature of radicalisation. The fact that far-right extremists are able to capitalise on the Black Lives Matter riots is indicative of the fact that the Black Lives Matter riots are dangerous and that the organisation is by nature extreme. If the organisation was not extreme, and if it were not demonising white people, then far-right extremists would have extremely limited success in recruiting off the back of it.

Recognising root grievances is necessary to fight radicalisation. Dismissing grievances, or "unsatisfactory events", as illegitimate or non-existent is to misunderstand how extremists recruit and ignorant to the existence of reciprocal extremism. For as long as there are far-left radicals demonising people with legitimate concerns, there will be far-right extremists willing to capitalise on that grievance.

This effect is amplified during the COVID economy, with multiple grievances compounding to create volatile economic and societal circumstances that will empower both far-left and far-right extremists for as long as that economic uncertainty remains. Understanding the role that reciprocal extremism has to play in this crisis will be essential in curtailing the radical growth of far-left or far-right extremism.

While the COVID economy is unlikely to be completely rectified any time soon, there are measures that can be taken both by Western governments and by politicians outside of

government to minimise the extent to which extremists can capitalise on this crisis. The question is whether those with that power are interested in curtailing extremism in the first place.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM, UNITED STATES, AND CANADA

The four-stage model for the emergence of an extremist or terrorist mindset (Figure 4) can be applied to any person who feels a sense of injustice. It applies to those susceptible to both far-right and far-left extremism. The three steps that lead up to the “Distancing/Devaluation” stage, whereby an extremist harbours hate and resentment for those they believe are responsible for the injustice (and those people may or may not be responsible) represent three opportunities for political leaders to intervene.

If Western leaders had the political will to address the grievances outlined in this paper, then fewer people would find themselves at the third stage, “Target Attribution”. However, if political leaders fail in these first two stages, work can still be done at the third stage.

The following policy considerations are separated into the first three steps of this four-stage process, with a view to preventing the “Distancing/Devaluation” stage.

### 1. Addressing Grievances with Weekly Economic Press Briefings

The first stage in the four-stage process is the initial grievance, or the experience of an unsatisfying event. In this instance, the unsatisfying event is the economic crash and high rates of unemployment.

It is in the interests of Western governments to ensure that citizens are aware that the economic crisis was a result of lockdown and not a failure of capitalism, and that while government was able to provide economic relief to those affected by joblessness, it has not been without consequences and cannot last forever.

Far-left radicals are using the government’s willingness to provide direct financial assistance to millions of people as an example of how the government *can* do more but under normal circumstances *refuses* to do more. This grievance—the notion that the government hoards wealth—feels very real in difficult economic conditions. As a grievance, it could potentially be felt more in Canada where the employment was not as high as

it was in the United States and United Kingdom pre-lockdown.

Economic conditions are also right for far-right groups to radicalise and recruit, using legitimate grievance as an anchor—or a keystone—to position themselves as the “truthtellers” in the face of government lies.

Western governments may therefore consider taking steps to ensure citizens better understand economic conditions before, during, and as we leave the COVID economy.

Daily press briefings during the initial outbreak of COVID-19 were introduced to ensure the public were fully aware of the state of the pandemic and the spread of the virus, owing to the huge impact that the virus would have on everyday life. The economic damage felt as a result of lockdown will have an equally notable impact on the daily lives of many millions of people.

Governments may, therefore, wish to consider implementing regular press briefings focusing on the state of the economy. President Donald Trump has already taken steps to establish a focus on rebuilding the economy, announcing in April the formation of a task force to make recommendations for the rebuilding of the economy. President Trump has also held several press conferences detailing the progress of the United States economic recovery in an effort to demonstrate his administration's ability to rebuild, in the run-up to the November presidential election. However, more could still be done.

Weekly press conferences that focus not just on the progress of national economies, but also on the damage done to the economy as a result of economic measures taken to reduce the impact of lockdown, would ensure the media and viewers at home understand the sacrifices made to safeguard jobs and ensure people have money in their pockets.

## 2. Addressing the Sense of Injustice with Meaningful Policy and Willingness to Listen

The economic crash following lockdown measures—or the *unsatisfying event*—develops into a feeling of injustice. In terms of radicalisation, it is entirely possible that the sense of injustice, which is the second stage of the four-stage process, is not based entirely in reality. However, in this case, it could be.

Whether or not this feeling of injustice is supported by evidence, it poses the very real possibility of moving a section of society to harbour ill feelings towards particular groups. This may be the politicians and the media, it may be immigrants, or it may be ethnic minorities. When the feeling of injustice, as well as the initial sense of grievance, are based in reality, however, then the potential for radicalisation becomes much more concerning. When the grievance is real, there is more reason for people to harbour resentment.

In the case of the COVID economy, which is having a tangible and real impact on the lives of non-university-

Press conferences of this kind could set the record straight on issues like universal basic income and other extreme-left proposals that would make the problem worse. Heads of government would present projections for economic recovery based on rebuilding successful capitalist economies as well as projections for recovery based on issuing thousands of dollars per month to citizens for several more years. Then compare.

Such a measure would force the media to face reality and show that government is listening and willing to tell the truth about difficult economic issues. It would greatly impact the ability of far-left radicals to normalise extremist ideas while also undercutting the easy answers (often involving anti-Semitic and racist conspiracy theories) offered by the far right.

educated workers, politicians might consider taking steps to address this sense of injustice.

Far-right and far-left extremists are taking advantage of a sense of injustice felt by people on a fairly general level. The difference in the approach taken to solve these problems, or the answers offered by these competing extremist fringes, is bigger than the difference between the sense of injustice felt by people more inclined to lean towards the far right and those inclined to lean towards the far-left. In fact, as the data in Table 3 shows, people of virtually all political perspectives are increasingly likely to lean towards far-left ideas (particular economic) in this COVID economy.

Politicians, in government or otherwise, should therefore consider the COVID economy a time to put aside many partisan issues, show a willingness to listen to those most impacted by the lockdown, and resist the temptation to sew division along the lines of trendy and topical campaigns.

## Resisting the Normalisation of Racist Leftist Policy

For leaders on the left, this would mean refusing to capitulate to left-wing extremists who engage in violence and other criminal activity in the name of “racial justice”, as has been seen in the Black Lives Matter riots since the tragic death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. It would mean immediately dismissing manifestos, like the one published in the *New York Times*, which call for the introduction of interest-free loans for black people and policies designed to address black unemployment above all other people.

These are fringe ideas and left-wing leaders should not be fooled into thinking that they are anything more than fringe ideas because a newspaper published them, or because violent rioters demand them.

A YouGov poll<sup>99</sup> in the United Kingdom in mid-July showed just how fringe radical left-wing ideas are when separated from the economic issues used as a cover to normalise them. Support for footballers (soccer players) “taking the knee” at football matches was just 37 percent, and support for the removal of statues linked to slavery was only 27 percent. Just 21 percent of respondents said Black Lives Matter protests should have gone ahead, and 13 percent said the protesters were right to damage or remove statues.

The capitulation of political leaders on the topic of removing statues proved controversial enough. Capitulation on race politics when it comes to solving issues like unemployment could generate an even worse backlash given it directly relates to the quality of life of millions of people.

## Considering Short-Term Immigration Policy and Attitudes

On the topic of immigration, the grievance used as an anchor by far-right extremists, government officials might consider temporary measures to restrict the influx of migrant workers who may be in direct competition to citizens still looking for work. Disregarding the usual arguments over whether immigration has an impact on unemployment or can inhibit the ability of the native population to obtain meaningful work in a normal economic environment, the COVID economy presents unique circumstances in which citizens need all the help they can get to secure work as the economy rebuilds.

Politicians from outside of government may also consider refraining from using temporary immigration measures, like those already imposed in the United States, as a stick to beat government with. These are not normal times, and campaigning against any such measures—or even advocating more immigration—at such an uncertain time will risk breeding more resentment from people hurting the most.

Combined with the uncertain economic environment and the race-baiting of far-left activists, any push against temporary immigration reform will create an ideal environment for far-right extremists to recruit.



### 3. Addressing Target Attribution Via Social Media and Awareness Campaigns

At the Target Attribution stage, people who may have otherwise not been political at all begin attributing blame to people who may or may not be to blame for the grievances and injustice they experience. In the COVID economy, which has coincided with Black Lives Matter riots, this may include ethnic minorities, politicians, and members of the press.

In some cases, the blame may be somewhat justified. If politicians and the media outlets contribute to the cycle of reciprocal extremism by advocating far-left policy positions, then the blame will be directed towards them and they will experience hostility not just from average citizens but also from the far-right groups that will take advantage of those grievances.

Targeting of ethnic minorities, however, should be the foremost concern in this regard. Legitimate grievances about unemployment and immigration, combined with violent Black Lives Matter riots, will embolden far-right extremists. This has already occurred in Western nations and is likely to get worse for as long as politicians fail to acknowledge why people feel grievance and a sense of injustice.

Western governments may, therefore, consider a public information campaign addressing the topic of extremism and why it is more important to discuss than ever. Much in the same way it has been proposed that political leaders should be honest with the public about the economic impact of economic stimulus measures during lockdown, political leaders may also wish to honestly and frankly address the issue of reciprocal extremism, and opportunism from far-left and far-right extremists during the COVID economy.

Presuming that political leaders are willing to take on board the considerations outlined in the second section of these policy proposals, a social media public awareness campaign could prove beneficial in countering narratives of all kinds of extremists.

When political leaders have demonstrated honesty with the public about the economic damage done during lockdown and shown willingness to talk about issues like immigration during this temporary economic crash, public awareness campaigns will mean more.

By addressing the ways in which far-right and far-left extremists are attempting to take advantage of uncertainty in the COVID economy, political leaders can undercut that opportunism and lay bare the facts. A public information campaign would immediately undercut a key talking point used by extremists: the claim that politicians don't listen. This must, however, be combined with the policy proposals outlined earlier or it may appear a duplicitous attempt at hiding government failings.

A social media campaign would take the form of videos—like those used during the COVID lockdown campaigns—as well as interactive discussions like British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's "People's Question Time" videos on Facebook. Educational materials may also be produced and distributed online, as part of such a scheme.

Key themes of such a social media campaign would include:

- Addressing the real cause of high unemployment and directly addressing the arguments of far-left extremists;
- Addressing the impact that high unemployment has on people of all ethnic backgrounds;
- Reaffirming government commitment to rebuilding an economy for everybody, and standing firmly against racist proposals from far-left extremists;
- Outlining government willingness to address immigration if it presents a temporary impact on employment opportunities for citizens;

- Reminding citizens of the possibilities that a free economy presents long-term, and the damage that excessive government spending has done and could continue to do.

## **Undercutting Extremists' Ability to Capitalise on Legitimate Grievances**

Avoiding difficult conversations doesn't mean the problems underpinning those conversations go away. The COVID economy presents a new kind of economic uncertainty; this isn't just a recession, but a shift in the way businesses operate and how people work at a time of civil unrest and extremist campaigns infiltrating mainstream politics.

Having honest discussions about difficult topics could go a long way in addressing the concerns that people—particularly those who earned the least—have, as well as undercutting the opportunity for extremists to take advantage of economic uncertainty.

The COVID economy has highlighted issues that have long festered in Western nations, with politicians promising to take action and either failing to succeed in implementing those policies or forgetting about them completely. At such a divisive time in politics, where there is a substantial Perception Gap between competing sides, the effect of reciprocal extremism is being felt in quite a substantial way. The longer that key issues, which form the Grievance step of the process of radicalisation, are not fully addressed either through meaningful policy or a willingness to make change, the worse that reciprocal extremism will get and the more radical competing sides will become.

This is less an issue of left and right and more a problem of political convenience and unwillingness to address issues that may, in the short term, not be personally beneficial for individual politicians to address. However, when faced with the very real possibility of a deeply fractured society, it is demonstrably in the interests of mainstream politicians to put egos, petty politics, and personal gain aside and address problems that will get worse in the long run.

Canada may be at somewhat of a disadvantage when it comes to addressing extremism by having difficult conversations, owing to the Prime Minister's very public leaning towards radical progressive politics. President Donald Trump's bullish populist message paired with the bitter and ongoing battle with radical left-wing Democrats could also prove a stumbling block for the kind of measures outlined in this paper to be introduced.

Perhaps the British Conservative government, which has demonstrated a willingness to engage with political issues affecting the traditional Labour-voting working class (an approach that won the Conservatives a historic majority in the January general election) is the most likely to consider these proposals.

If politicians demonstrate a willingness to work on a bipartisan basis on difficult political issues, while levelling with the public on very grave economic matters, the talking points of extremists may be reverted to pure conspiracy theory. Undercut the ability of extremists to capitalise on legitimate grievances, and fewer people impacted by the COVID economy may reach the Target Attribution stage of the radicalisation process.

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