

Framing the economy:

The austerity story

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Executive summary

Well-framed, well-crafted and often repeated, the austerity story is the dominant political narrative in Britain today. It shapes how most of us think and talk about the economy. It has convinced most of the country of the need for huge public spending cuts and presents a coherent vision for the kind of society we should live in.

The austerity story

The Coalition tells a powerful story about the economy to make the case for austerity in the media and public communications. It is consistent, memorable, uses vivid images and emotional metaphors, and is simple enough to be understood and retold.

There are several frames that underpin it:

- 1. Dangerous debt** – the most important economic issue the UK faces is the size of public sector debt, caused by excessive public spending.
- 2. Britain is broke** – the UK's public finances are like an individual household, which has spent all its money.
- 3. Austerity is a necessary evil** – there is no economic alternative to spending cuts.
- 4. Big bad government** – the bloated, inefficient and controlling government is getting in the way of progress, interfering in people's lives and rewarding the undeserving.
- 5. Welfare is a drug** – like drug addiction, state support is tempting, but ultimately dangerous; benefit claimants are weak, reckless, undeserving and addicted to hand-outs.
- 6. Strivers and skivers** – there are two kinds of people in Britain: hardworking strivers and lazy skivers, we each choose which to be.
- 7. Labour's mess** – all the faults of our economy can be pinned on the previous (Labour) Government and their out of control spending.

Most of the frames in the austerity story resonate with millions of people in the UK:

- Polling data shows that month on month, no matter what people think about the Coalition, they continue to believe their spending cuts are necessary for the economy.
- Attitudes to welfare have hardened over time so that half the country believe the unemployed choose to stay out of work.
- Evidence indicates that more people may blame Labour for the economic situation we are in now than did three years ago.

This has tough implications for austerity's opponents: when a frame is strongly held we tend to ignore facts that do not fit with it. The austerity story is a powerful narrative that is embedded in public consciousness. It cannot be challenged with facts. Only with new frames and a different story about the economy can it be dislodged.

Challengers to the austerity story

A number of organisations and individuals communicate alternative narratives to the austerity story. None have the coherence or appeal of the Coalition's account of the economy, although each offers insights into how we might tell a different story. The challengers' weaknesses tend to fall into similar traps:

- Framing – opponents tend to accept Coalition frames or rely on negative and reactive frames that put forward no new vision for the economy. Where they do create new frames they often do not start where people are or resonate with what they believe about the economy.
- Storytelling – none of the challengers tell good stories with simple ideas and powerful images, they are more likely to rely on academic language. There is little unity in the stories that oppose austerity, and few common threads.
- Messengers – There are more people vocally supporting austerity in the media than opposing it, and those who do oppose the dominant story tend to be less confident or credible. The messengers for austerity seem more coordinated than those against it.

Towards a new story

The austerity story can be defeated, if its opponents identify and activate their own powerful frames. The frames must be developed from values and resonate with public opinion. They must be tested and refined based on what works. We outline some frames we believe could be used to build a new narrative, and a story that brings them together.

1. **Casino economy** – our economy is like a casino, it is in need of reform so that it can be stable and useful.
2. **Treading water** – we are not making any progress as a nation; we are running to stand still, struggling but not moving forward.
3. **Big bad banks** – our current problems are the result of a financial crisis that we, and not the banks that caused it, paid for.
4. **Big guys and little guys** – there are two types of people in Britain, the little guys who work hard and don't get a fair deal, and the big guys who have money and power and play by their own set of rules.
5. **Jobs Gap** – the biggest issue facing our country is the jobs gap: people who want to work but can't, people who work hard but don't take home a decent wage and young people who cannot be sure of a good job.
6. **Time for renewal** – we need to rebuild and renew what made Britain great – from the railways to our education system. We need to invest.
7. **Austerity is a smokescreen** – The Coalition uses the deficit as an excuse to do what they have always wanted to do like shrink the state and privatisate the NHS. We cannot trust them; they aren't out to help ordinary people.

The battle for the economic narrative will be won with stories, not statistics. It is time the opponents of austerity tell a story of their own. To win, they will need to do more than find their frames, they will need to be more coordinated, responsive to public opinion and find more credible messengers.

Introduction

Imagine yourself at the starting line of a race. You've been training for six months; walking the course day and night until you know it like the back of your hand, practising a quick start and a sprint finish. You size up your opponent from the corner of your eye, adjusting their running gear. You bend down to check your laces are tied tightly. You stare at your feet in dawning horror. You're not wearing trainers. Your feet are bare against the ground. And before you can think what to do, a klaxon sounds and your opponent sets off at a fast pace. There's nothing for it; you sprint after them, trying to close the gap but wincing as your feet collide with the floor. You are the faster runner, but the going is hard and they are already ahead. Your heart pounds in your chest. Can you still win the race?

This is a story about two runners. One who is already ahead, and one who could catch up if only they were better equipped for the race

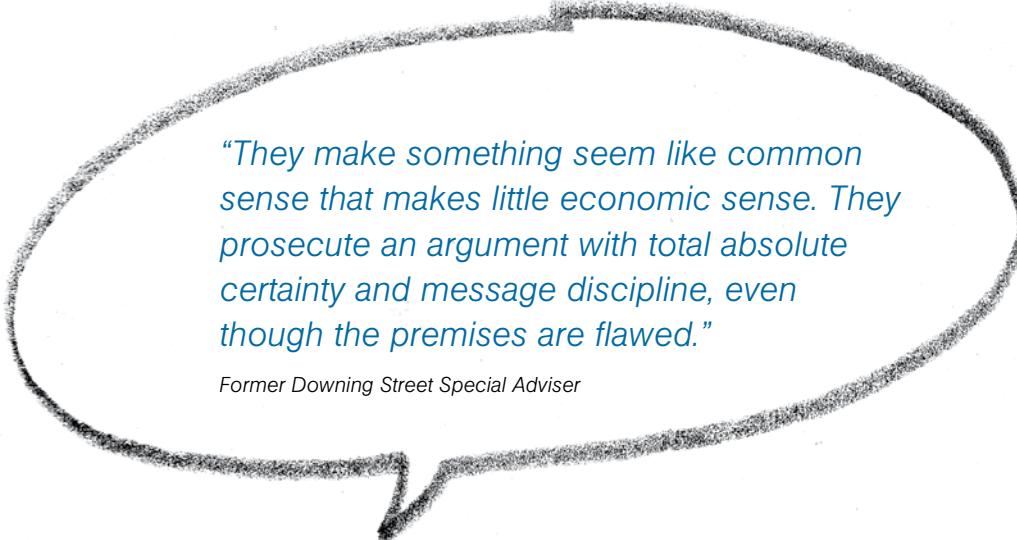
When it comes to the economy, those in favour of austerity are in the lead, and those opposed to it are lagging behind, partly because they do not have the tools they need.

This paper argues that the main tool they are missing is their own story that frames the economy according to how they see it, and attacks the dominant story that those who support austerity have developed. It shows how much of austerity's power comes from a compelling story, repeatedly told with incredible discipline. It finds that those who oppose austerity economics have often put too much faith in facts; instead of providing a clear vision for a different economic approach.

It does so by analysing:

- The story of austerity, and the frames that sit behind it;
- The other, weaker stories that try to compete with it;
- Academic research on political narratives, framing, storytelling and values;
- Polling data and expert interviews to gauge what Britain thinks about the economy;
- Ways to reframe the debate.

The Austerity Story



"They make something seem like common sense that makes little economic sense. They prosecute an argument with total absolute certainty and message discipline, even though the premises are flawed."

Former Downing Street Special Adviser

There are many ways to explain what's going on in our economy, but for some time one account has dominated public debate. You are probably already familiar with it:

The nation has maxed out its credit card.

For more than ten years our country was running on debt. Government and individuals were borrowing too much and spending without a thought of how they would meet the cost.

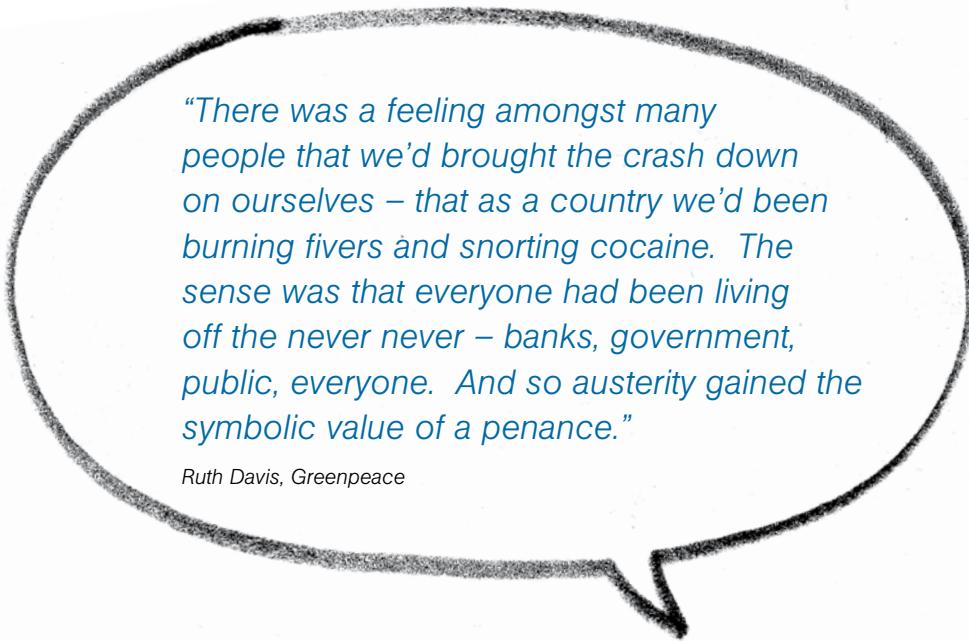
The mountains of debt we ran up led to the financial crisis. If we are to come out of recession they must be repaid. The most important task facing the Government is to cut spending, pay off our debts and eliminate the deficit. Austerity is a tough medicine but there is no alternative.

But the problems in our economy run even deeper. We live in a country where those who work hard, play by the rules and try to be independent are undermined by the state. Where those who choose to stay at home are rewarded by lavish benefits and an easy ride – paid for by hard-working families' taxes. Where the businesses we need to drive our recovery are over-taxed, over-regulated and stifled by government bureaucracy.

There is no easy way out of the mess we inherited. But if we work hard and don't shy away from the tough choices we can build an economy that rewards the people who want to get on.

This story, or a version of it, has been told by those who support austerity repeatedly and confidently for several years. This section examines the austerity story in more detail, looking at the values and frames that sit behind it. It draws on theories of public narrative¹, political storytelling², framing³ and values⁴.

Anatomy of the story



"There was a feeling amongst many people that we'd brought the crash down on ourselves – that as a country we'd been burning fivers and snorting cocaine. The sense was that everyone had been living off the never never – banks, government, public, everyone. And so austerity gained the symbolic value of a penance."

Ruth Davis, Greenpeace

Stories are a powerful way to persuade people⁵. Research suggests our minds process arguments presented in stories differently.⁶⁻⁷ We become more interested in issues that do not affect us personally, more likely to change our minds and less sceptical – we literally suspend disbelief.⁸

In *The Political Brain*,⁹ Drew Westen offers an account of what makes a good political story:

- consistent
- memorable
- full of vivid images and emotional metaphors
- simple enough to be readily understood and retold.

Each of the experts we interviewed¹⁰ told a similar version of the austerity story when asked what the Government's economic narrative was. Almost all referred to similar metaphors (i.e. the maxed out credit card or the economy being like a household purse) at least once. None fully supported the Government's view of the economy, but all agreed the story offered a coherent version of events.

We know the austerity story is compelling because it has a plot, characters and a moral¹¹⁻¹² that are easy to identify.

Plot

A good plot involves challenge and choice.¹³ In the austerity story we have both: the challenge of tackling the deficit to pay off our mountain of debt, of curbing excessive government spending and making the economy work for those who deserve to be rewarded. The choice we face is whether to be strivers or skivers; whether to work hard or do nothing – both individually and as a country. (There is no choice about whether we or not we actually need to pay off our debt, because there is no alternative to austerity.)

Characters

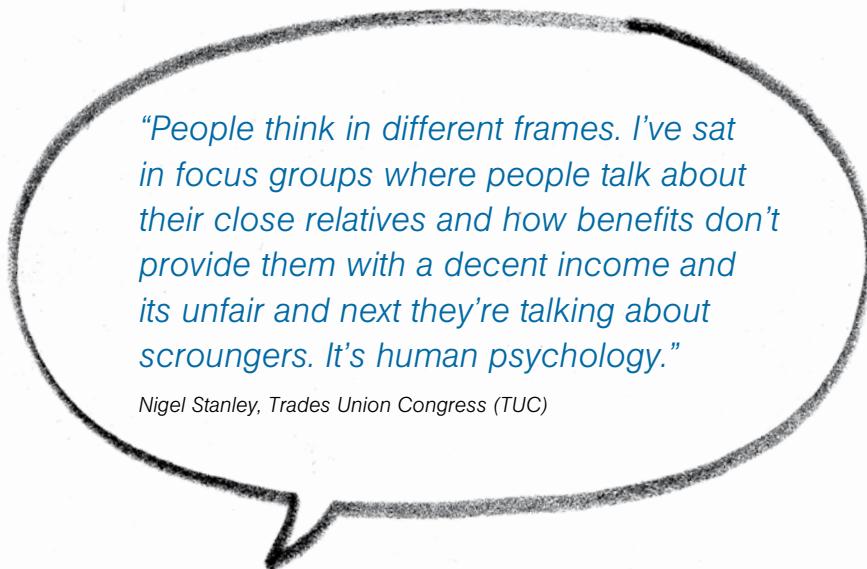
A compelling story has heroes and villains (or protagonists and antagonists¹⁴). The heroes of the austerity story are beleaguered – 'those who work hard and play by the rules' – the businesses and entrepreneurs that create wealth and are vital for economic recovery. The main enemy they face is government – interfering, bloated and wasteful. Skivers are also villains, but they have been emboldened by government action and a twisted economic system.

Coalition politicians are not cast as part of government. They are heroes too, making tough choices in order to fix our broken economy.

Moral

The moral of the austerity story is clear: you cannot live beyond your means. We must all pay our own way, whether that is by paying off the deficit, or getting a job if we expect a roof over our heads. The lesson we learn is that we cannot have something for nothing.

What frames does the austerity story use?



In the same way that our minds use stories to understand the world, they also think in frames. Frames are like mental shorthand – a quick way for us to understand the world based on existing preconceptions about it. American academic, George Lakoff argues that framing is a powerful means of persuasion because once people hold a frame strongly enough, they will reject facts that do not fit with it.¹⁵ Intuitively we know this is true: if I think my eyes are brown, because everyone has told me my eyes are brown for years, and then one day someone shows me a mirror in which they seem green, my first assumption is to question the mirror, not the colour of my eyes.

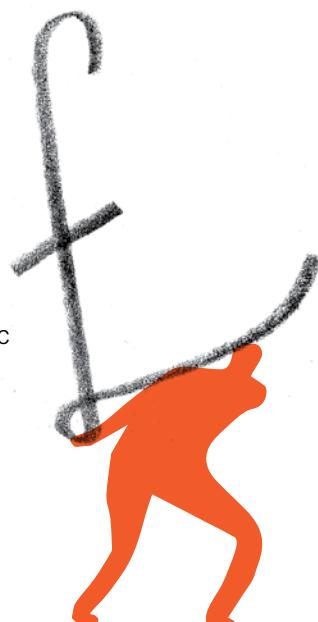
Framing theory also tells us that the more we hear a frame repeated, the more it is strengthened in our minds.¹⁶ The more you hear the recession presented as Labour's failure, or the national debt presented as the biggest problem we face, the more likely you are to believe it. Eventually, any facts we hear that do not fit our frames will be disregarded. At this stage, the only way others can challenge our mindset is with another frame: a different way of understanding an issue that we believe is closer to the truth.

The austerity story sets out clear frames for debates about the economy. Each frame tells its own story, which in turn fits into and reinforces the larger narrative. Each frame comes with its own language and metaphors which activate it in people's minds. The frames work on their own but they also support each other.

Based on desk-based analysis of media debate and government communications we have identified seven core frames that sit behind the austerity story, shaping the terms in which we think about the economy. Some of them are frames that have existed for a long time which the Story tries to reinforce. Others are attempts to reframe the debate, and to directly change the way we think about the economy.

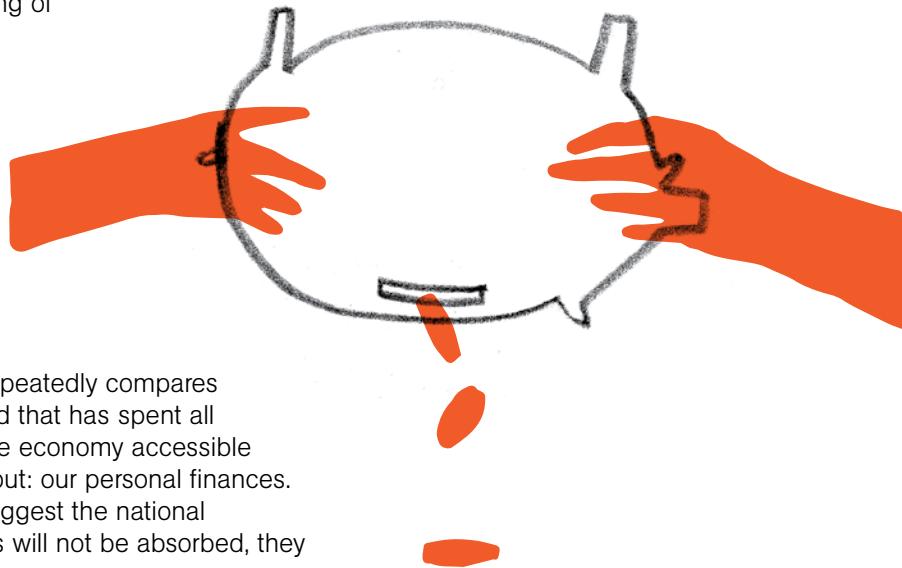
1. Dangerous debt

Debt is clearly important in the austerity story. We are told that debt (and public spending) were the cause of the economic crisis, that our debts are too high and that they must be repaid. The frame that sits behind this says debt is dangerous – something threatening that we should fear. This frame asks two things of us: to think about the economy in terms of debt and to be afraid of debt. And if we have 'mountains' of debt, if the national credit card is 'maxed out', then we need to be very afraid indeed.



Activating the frame: This frame existed long before the austerity story.

Most of us already hold negative frames about debt, often rooted in personal experience. What the austerity story does is combine our existing fears about debt with our understanding of what is wrong with the economy. This means that single words are likely to activate the frame: borrowing, debt, deficit, credit, national debt. These words have become associated with the dangerous debt frame in our minds, they remind us to be afraid of debt, that the national debt is too high and must be repaid.



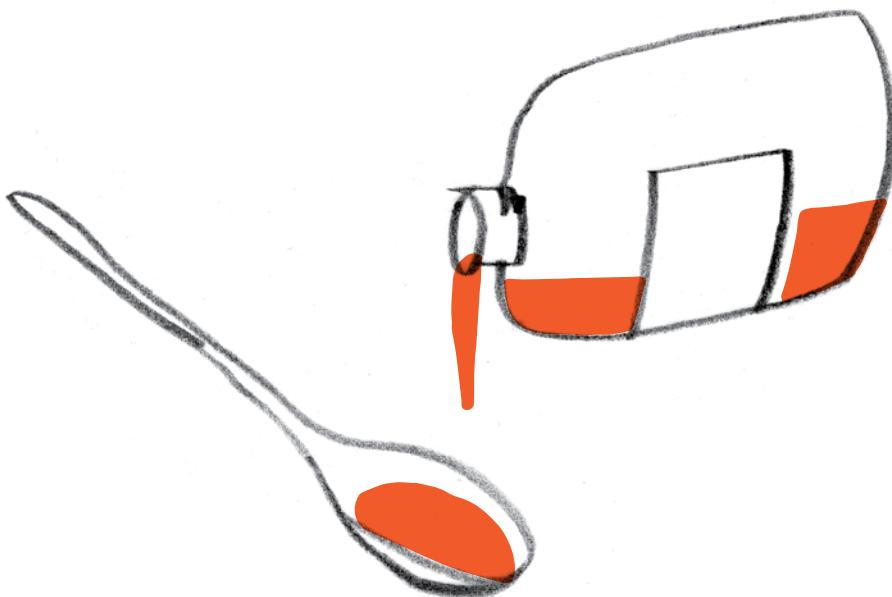
2. Britain is broke

Frames are often metaphors. The austerity story repeatedly compares the UK and its economy to an individual household that has spent all its money. This metaphor makes thinking about the economy accessible because it compares it to something we know about: our personal finances. If this frame is strongly held, presenting facts to suggest the national economy doesn't resemble a household's finances will not be absorbed, they will be ignored because they do not fit the frame.

Activating the frame: Saying that Britain is broke, talking about a maxed-out credit card, the public purse, budgeting, living within our means, and there being no money left all reminds us that the economy is best understood as a household.

3. Austerity is a necessary evil

Spending cuts are never presented as desirable; their part in the austerity story hinges on the idea that there is no alternative to them. This is a very powerful way to frame an argument, suggesting there is no choice to be made. It is the lynchpin of the austerity story, the part that you must accept to make the plot believable. People who argue against austerity by stressing the pain it causes are not attacking this frame – depending on their language they may even be reinforcing it.



Activating the frame: A common way to activate this frame is to use the metaphor of medicine. When you are sick medicine is the only way to make you better. You have to take it even if it tastes bad or makes you feel worse and have faith you will be better off in the long run. Acknowledging that austerity is 'tough' or 'painful' also activates the necessary evil frame.

4. Big bad government

Government is bad. Government is too big. Framing government negatively is separate to issues of debt and spending. The austerity story blames government for building up debt, but it also blames it for interfering in people's lives, for rewarding the undeserving, for getting in the way of how the economy should work. The logic of this frame is clear, government is bad and the bigger government is, the worse that is for the economy.



Activating the frame: Once this frame is embedded, using the term 'big government' activates a negative image of the Government in our mind. Government is an overweight bully, bloated, inefficient and controlling. Talking about government bureaucracy or the nanny state also taps into this frame.

5. Welfare is a drug

There are many ways we can think about state support; the austerity story equates it with drug addiction. If welfare is like a drug it is tempting, even enjoyable, but ultimately dangerous. Drug addiction evokes its own frames, most of which are negative and to do with human weakness.

Activating the frame: Framing welfare negatively is nothing new, nor unique to the UK.¹⁷ In fact, some consider the frame to be so strong that the word welfare now carries negative connotations on its own.¹⁸ Language of dependency activates this frame, as does talking about the weakness or recklessness of people on benefits. George Osborne implicitly evoked drug addiction (as well as laziness) in his 2012 Autumn Statement, when he spoke of people at home with the "curtains drawn" during the day.



6. Strivers and skivers

There are two kinds of people in Britain: strivers and skivers. Strivers go to work and play by the rules, skivers choose to be unemployed. This frame is deliberately polarising: it asks you to identify yourself as a striver, a hero of the story, and frames those on benefits or out of work as lazy. Beneath it is the inference that strivers and skivers make a choice; they choose to contribute or to live off others' hard work.

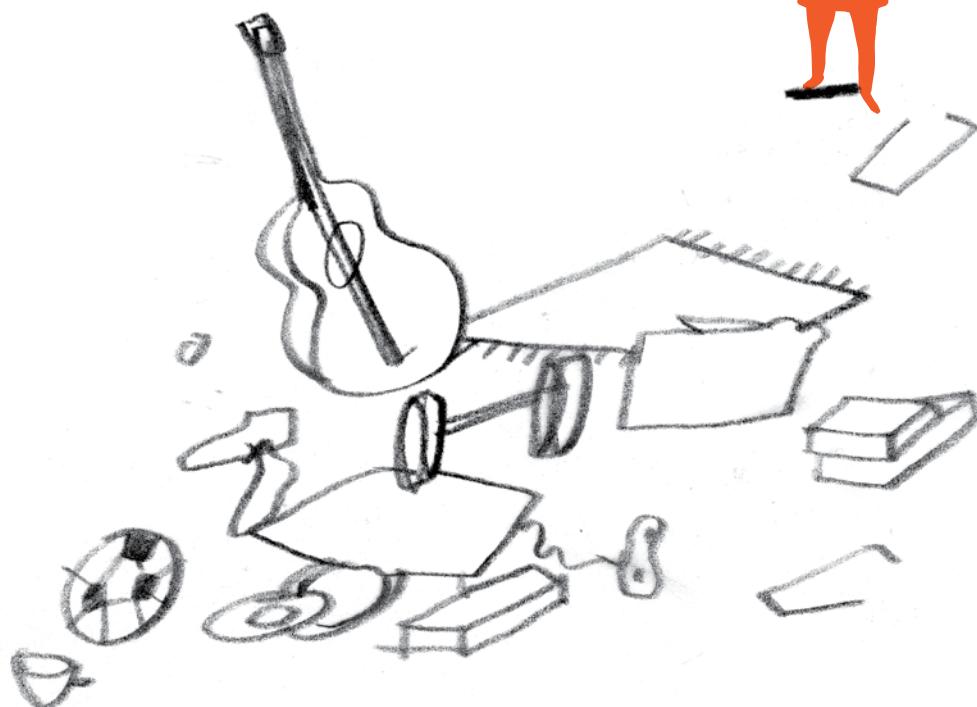
Activating the frame: The frame is clearly being activated when words like skiver and scrounger are being used, but also with loaded terms that imply two types of people: 'hard-working families' suggests there are lazy families; 'those who work hard' reminds us that many don't work hard or even work at all; and 'genuine benefit claimants' implies large numbers of people claim benefits fraudulently. Using the language of choice, particularly to do with unemployment, also engages the frame.



7. Labour's mess

The austerity story blames the previous (Labour) Government for almost all that is wrong with the economy. By framing our current problems as Labour's mess, the Coalition reinforces itself as the hero in its story, righting the wrongs created by others. Mess is an important part of this frame, it makes us think of chaos and ineptitude. Teenagers and pets make mess; they cannot be trusted with serious responsibilities.

Activating the frame: Labour's mess is a term you hear regularly to activate this frame, as are references to 'the previous Government' in connection with bad news about the economy, or talk of the deficit and spending.



The values underpinning the austerity story

"Opinions are the ripples on the surface of the public's consciousness, shallow and easily changed. Attitudes are the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger. Values are the deep tides of the public mood, slow to change but powerful."

Robert Worcester, founder, MORI

The most effective stories and frames connect with people's values. Alongside our experiences, personal circumstances, social and cultural norms, our values shape what we think and what we do. They have been shown to affect the career we choose, what we eat, who we vote for and how we spend our money.¹⁹

Research in social psychology²⁰ shows that there is a set of universal human values – shared across and within cultures – which we all hold. We differ in how strongly we prioritise them, and how we apply them in our lives.

Values are related to each other. Some are closely linked, such as pleasure and self-indulgence, or obedience and self-discipline, while others are in mental conflict such as self-indulgence and self-discipline, freedom and security.²¹

Appealing to values increases the chance people will engage with and respond to what you say, because they are things we hold in common, that resonate at a deep emotional level. And, just like frames, values are like muscles: the more we appeal to a value, the stronger it becomes.²² Not only this, but we strengthen the values that are related to those we engage²³ and weaken the values that are dissimilar to it.²⁴ This means a powerful story like the austerity story will affect more than just our attitudes to economic policy; it will influence how we feel about all social and environmental issues.²⁵

With the help of Common Cause's value mapping tool,²⁶ we've identified five values that are central to the austerity story. These are ambition, wealth, self-discipline, independence and reciprocity. By invoking them the Government is appealing to a certain side of our nature, strengthening a particular set of values and weakening others.

Box 1 explores these values further. Understanding them is critical; they summarise the kind of society and economy the austerity story wants to build, and influence how we are likely to think and act in future. If we believe the story, it will shape not just how we see the economy but how we see the world: as an individualised, competitive society, focused on wealth over people.

Box 1: The austerity story's core values

Self-discipline

Self-discipline is a value associated with obedience and accepting social norms. It runs throughout the austerity story. Self-discipline was lacking when we ran up our debts, leading to economic crisis, and it is what separates the strivers from skivers. It is also what is required to get us out of the mess we are in: austerity is painful, but by appealing to our self-discipline the Government asks us to endure that pain. By strengthening self-discipline the austerity story is weakening values like self-indulgence.

Independence

Independence is a 'self-direction'²⁷ value. It is associated with choice and freedom. The austerity story appeals to independence by making heroes of the strivers – people who don't rely on government to support them. It is a story of individualism, from the economy which we understand as a household, to citizens who decide how they want to live and whether to work hard and get a job.

Reciprocity of favours

Reciprocity is a 'security value'²⁶ associated with stability and safety. Valuing it means believing positive actions should be rewarded with positive actions (and negative actions punished with negative actions). It can also be associated with an 'us' and 'them' mentality and a lack of compassion for outsiders. The austerity story appeals to our sense of reciprocity when criticising the welfare state: how can it be fair to support people who do not contribute by working? Instead we should be rewarding those that make a positive contribution; hard-working families and businesses that create jobs and wealth.

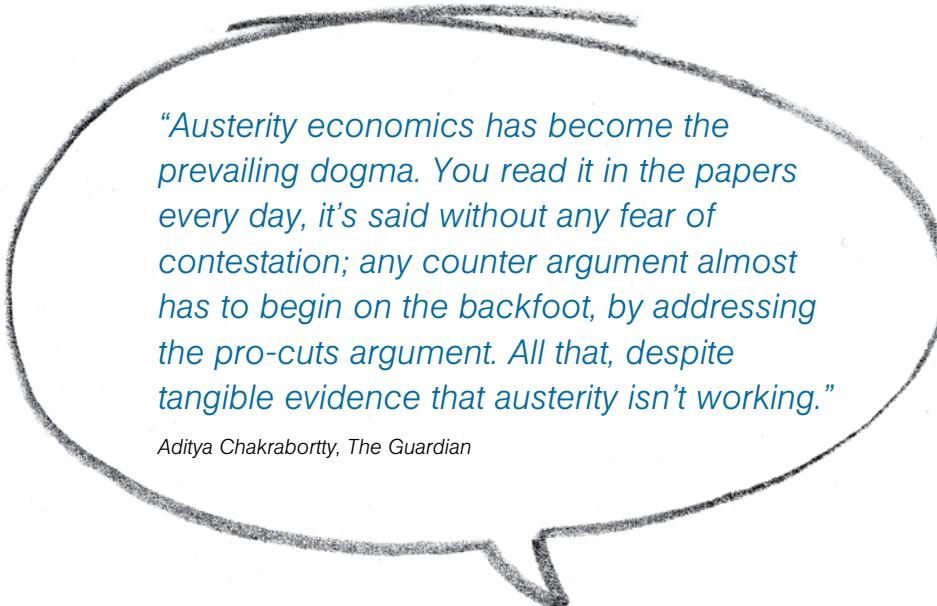
Ambition

Ambition is a value associated²⁸ with personal success through competence and ability. Ambition is another thing that separates strivers from skivers, a desire to achieve and be successful. Those who choose not to work show no ambition. Those who run companies and create jobs are driving economic success. Social recognition is closely related to ambition, and in the austerity story both are about financial success.

Wealth

Wealth is a power value, associated with status and control over resources. The austerity story implicitly values wealth by making debt a measure of our economic failure. If we are rich, we are successful. Being in debt means we are not wealthy or that we are putting our wealth at risk.

How powerful is the austerity story?



"Austerity economics has become the prevailing dogma. You read it in the papers every day, it's said without any fear of contestation; any counter argument almost has to begin on the backfoot, by addressing the pro-cuts argument. All that, despite tangible evidence that austerity isn't working."

Aditya Chakrabortty, *The Guardian*

From looking at the anatomy of the austerity story, we can see it is well crafted - but is it resonating with the public?

It's difficult to answer this question accurately without large-scale qualitative research, but polling data can be a helpful indicator of British attitudes towards the economy and austerity.

Two rich sources of polling data are the British Social Attitudes Survey, which offers a long-term perspective on British opinion, and the YouGov economy tracker,²⁹ which has been posing the same questions about the economy since 2010 and monitoring changing attitudes.

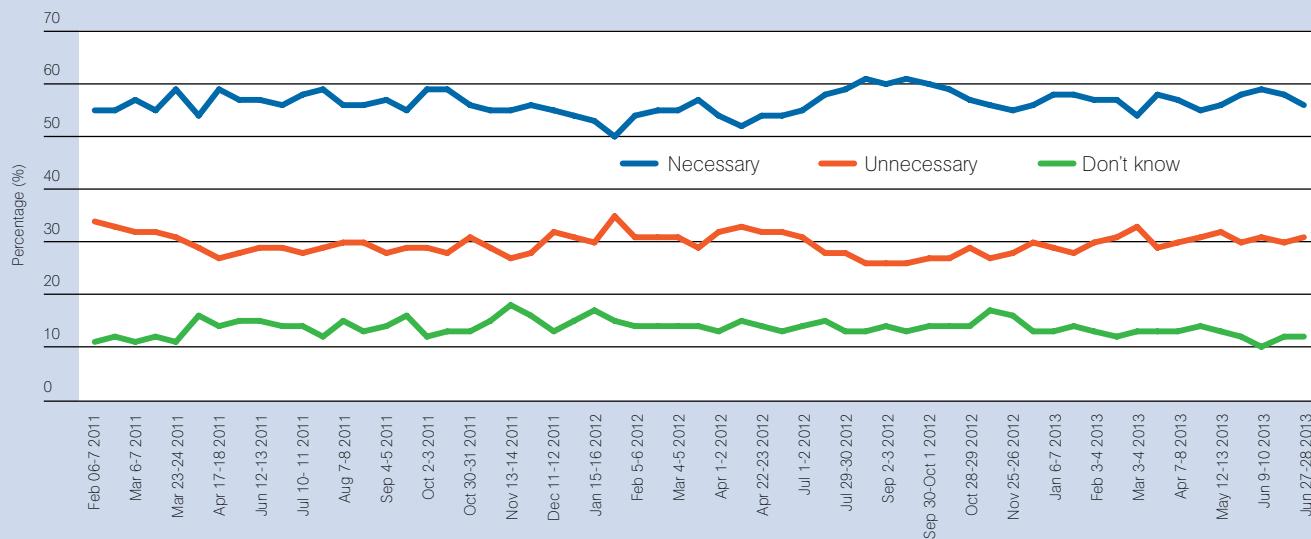
It's important to be realistic about the limitations of polling data: there are many complex factors shaping public attitudes towards the economy, of which the Government's narrative is only one, so correlation is not the same as causation. However, even with these caveats, survey data offers important insights about the strength of the austerity story.

There is no alternative to austerity

YouGov's economy tracker shows that a clear majority of British people have believed austerity to be necessary for the last three years, (see Figure 1).

The first three frames of the austerity story (Dangerous debt, Britain is broke, Austerity is a necessary evil) build on each other. If you believe that our biggest economic problem is debt and we need to handle debt like we would our personal finances, spending cuts become the obvious, unavoidable response. The data suggests at least 50% of people in the UK have accepted these frames, although we cannot tell whether this is just a consequence of the story itself.

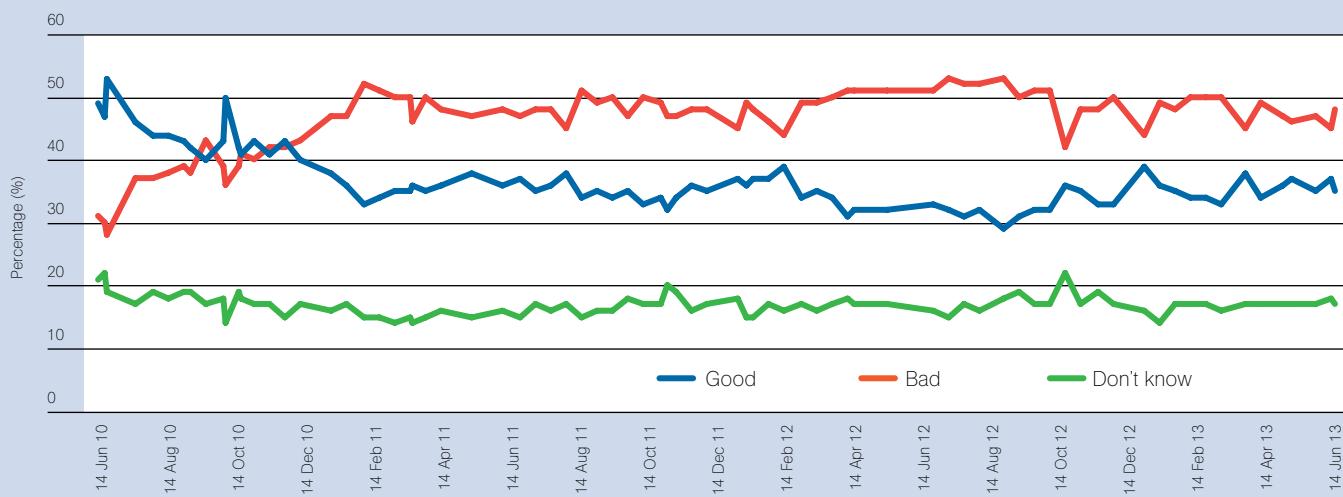
Figure 1: “Is the way the Government is cutting spending to reduce the Government’s deficit necessary or unnecessary?”



Source: YouGov economy tracker 2011-2013

Looking at another question in the YouGov polling we can see how resilient the belief in the need for austerity is (see Figure 2). The majority of people now believe the coalition's spending cuts are bad for the economy, compared to a majority who thought they were good in 2010. But when we compare this with Figure 1 we see this change over time has not dented the view that they are necessary; this seems to have become ingrained in public consciousness

Figure 2: Thinking about the way the Government is cutting spending to reduce the Government’s deficit, do you think this is good or bad for the economy?”



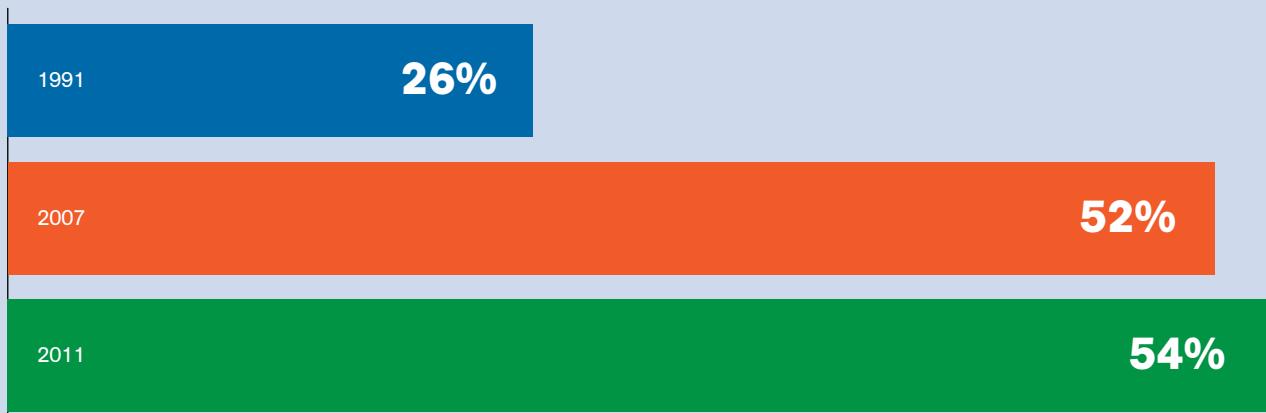
Source: YouGov Economy tracker, 2010-2013

Welfare is a drug

The last British Social Attitudes Survey³⁰ noted the changing attitudes to welfare in the UK.

- In 2001 88% agreed that government should be mainly responsible for ensuring unemployed people have enough to live on; in 2012 that number was 59%.
- 62% now believe that unemployment benefits are too high and discourage work – more than double the proportion who thought this in 1991 (27%) and a significantly higher proportion than said this was the case in 2007 (54%).

Figure 3: Percentage of survey respondents agreeing that “if benefits were less generous, people would stand on their own two feet”



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

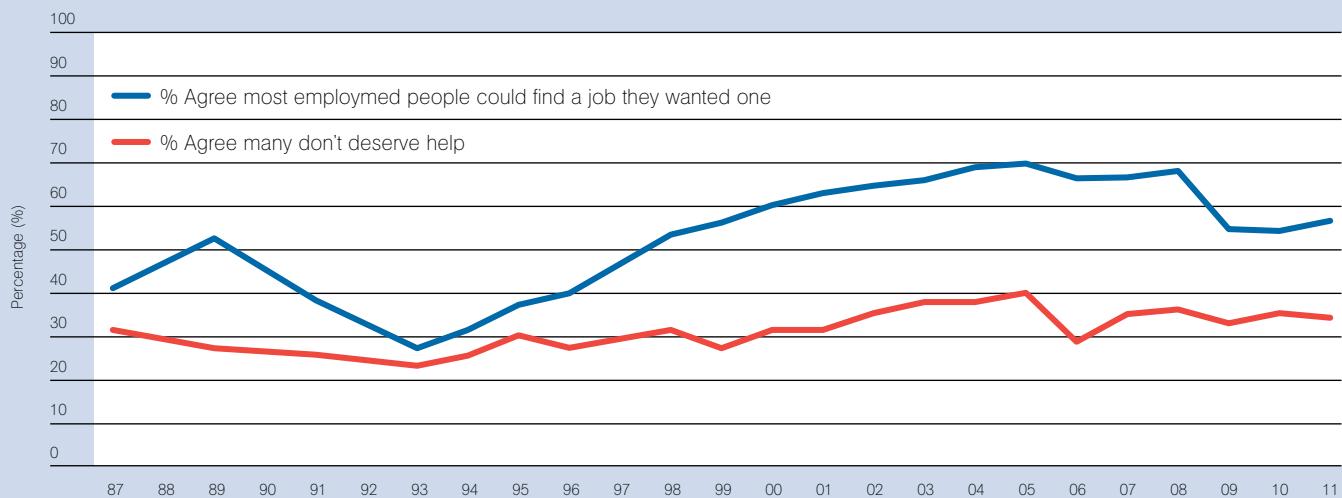
Over the course of two decades, the percentage of people in Britain who think benefits are so generous that people are dependent on them has doubled (Figure 3). Not only is this a huge change in opinion, it goes against the trend we expect in recessions when people tend to express more sympathy for benefits claimants because there are fewer jobs available.³¹ In this instance the austerity story is activating an already strongly held frame rather than creating one. For most people in the UK, welfare is now seen as a drug, a bad habit that needs to be kicked.

Strivers and skivers

Central to the strivers and skivers frame is the idea that unemployed people choose not to work. British attitudes to the unemployed have been hardening over the last two decades: in 1987 around 40% of people believed that most people out of work could find a job if they wanted, but by 2005 this number had risen to around 70% (see Figure 4).

This frame was weaker in the early 90s, presumably as a result of the recession strengthening a competing frame that work was hard to find. However the credit crunch has had a much smaller effect on attitudes, suggesting the strivers and skivers frame has been strengthened over the last decade. The result? Over half the country believe those out of work are skiving, choosing not to join the hard-working majority.

Figure 4: Attitudes to welfare recipients, 1987-2011

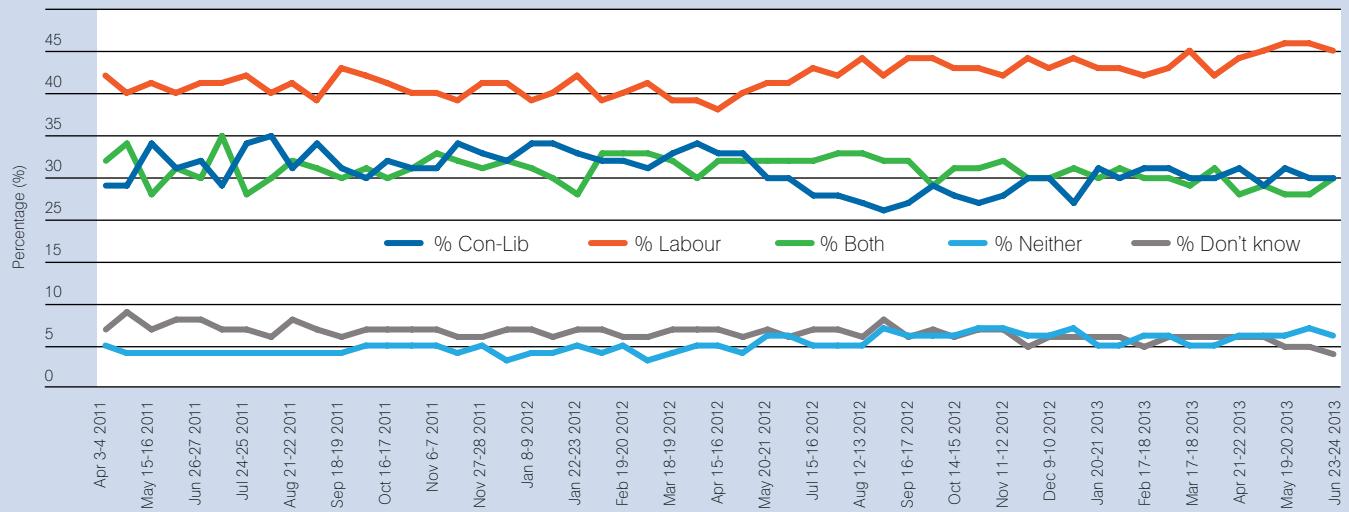


Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

Labour's mess

YouGov's economy tracker shows us that over a third of the British public have consistently blamed Labour for the current state of the economy since 2010.

Figure 5: "Who do you think is most to blame for the current spending cuts?"



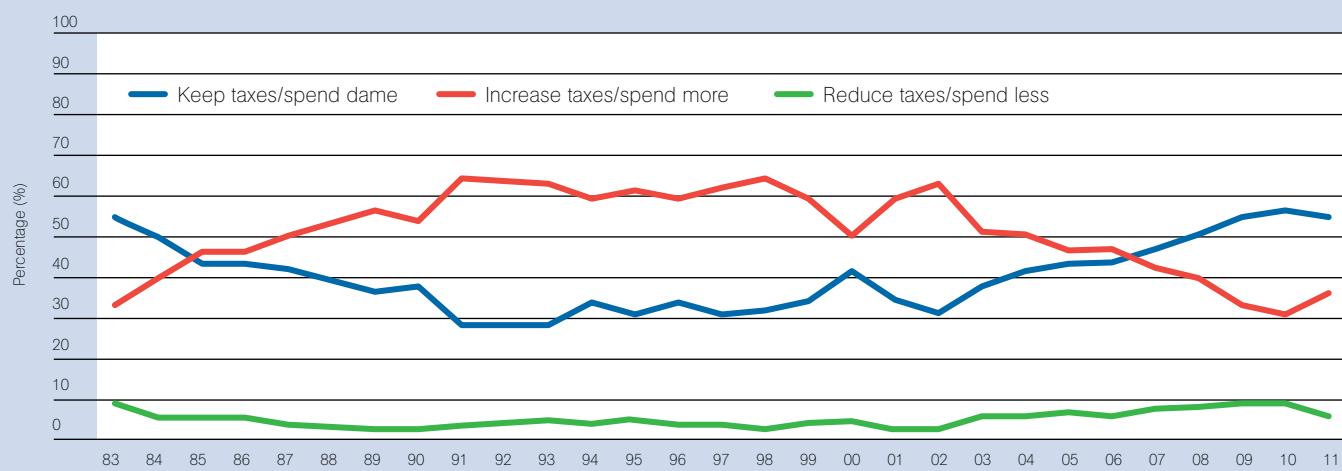
Source: YouGov

Given that Labour were in government at the time of the financial crash, it would be difficult to argue this was solely due to the power of the austerity story. What we might expect is for the proportion of people who blame Labour to decline over time, the longer the Coalition has power over the economy. However, the current trend of the data suggests that blame for Labour has slowly risen over time, suggesting the Labour's mess frame is being strengthened and not weakened. It will be interesting to see how these attitudes develop over the next two years.

Big bad government

And what about the other villain of the austerity story? Have negative frames about government been strengthened? One way to gauge attitudes to government is to look at how many people in Britain want government to get bigger, i.e. for spending to increase even if it means higher taxes (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Attitudes to taxation and spending, 1983-2011



Source: British Social Attitudes Survey

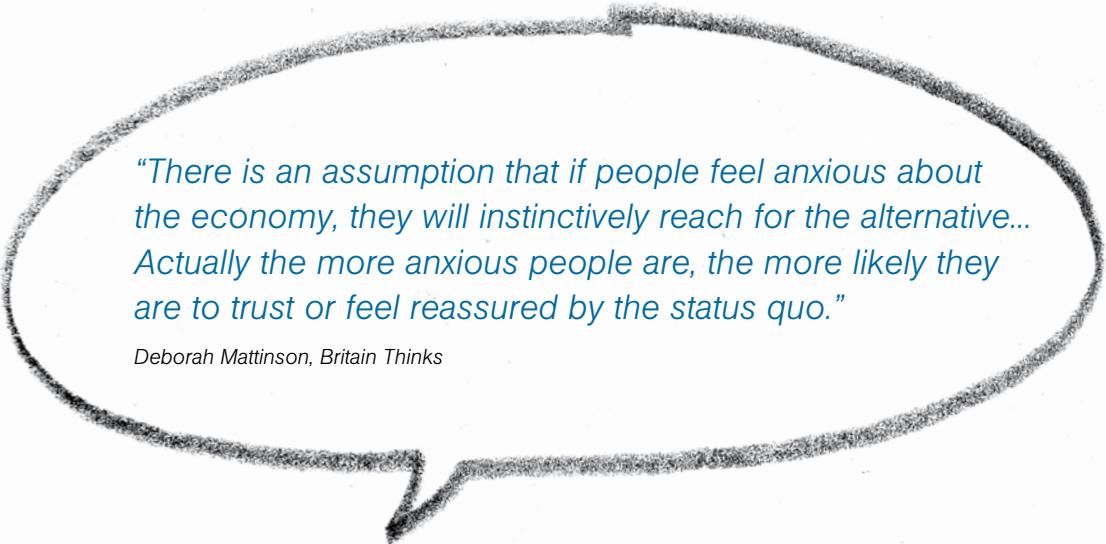
This frame seems to be the weak link in the austerity story. Although more people want spending and taxes to stay the same than to increase, the percentage of people who want a smaller state has remained under 10% for the last three decades. Contrary to the austerity story, most people don't think all government involvement in the economy is a bad thing.

There is a strong body of research that suggests³² attitudes to spending are cyclical. When government spending goes up, people's support for further spending increases at first, then falls away as they become more satisfied with services and more concerned with levels of tax. When expenditure is reduced, support for more spending increases, as people become dissatisfied with the state of public services. It will be interesting to see whether support for increased taxes and public spending rises in the next two years in response to the Coalition's cuts.

Looking at British opinion we can see that five of the seven frames in the austerity story are held by a majority of the population. In several cases the coalition's narrative merely resonates with what we already believe and is playing to trends in public opinion that have been forming over decades.

Facts fit frames. When a frame is strongly held we ignore facts that do not fit with it, unless they activate another competing frame. Opponents of the austerity story are up against a powerful narrative that is now embedded in British public consciousness. They cannot challenge these frames with facts; they need frames, and a story of their own.

Challengers to the austerity story



"There is an assumption that if people feel anxious about the economy, they will instinctively reach for the alternative... Actually the more anxious people are, the more likely they are to trust or feel reassured by the status quo."

Deborah Mattinson, Britain Thinks

So who are the opponents of austerity and what are they currently saying? In this section we outline the main alternatives to the austerity story, and analyse their strengths and weaknesses. We find that in their current form none of them poses a serious threat to the Government's narrative about the economy.

What alternative stories are there?

Our analysis suggests there is no single story about the economy that acts as a counterpoint to the austerity story. Instead there are a number of arguments and messages, (some which complement each other and others that are in direct competition) used by different groups and organisations to argue against the Government's programme of cuts. We summarise several below.

1. Too far, too fast

The current spending cuts go too far and too fast. The way the Government is cutting public spending and raising taxes risks making the economy and the deficit worse not better. Instead they should be acting to stimulate jobs and growth whilst keeping the deficit down.

Main messengers: Ed Balls, Labour Party³⁴

2. Bad economics

Austerity is the worst response to the economic crisis. By cutting spending the Government reduces economic activity, keeping the economy in recession. Instead the Government should be stimulating the economy to produce economic growth.

Main messengers: Keynesian economists e.g. Paul Krugman, Unite the Union

3. Tax not cuts

The decision to cut spending is politically motivated. We can reduce the deficit without making cuts to public spending. By clamping down on tax avoidance or making the banks – who caused the crisis – pay more taxes, we could eliminate the deficit altogether.

Main messengers: UK Uncut, People's Assembly³⁵

4. Green New Deal

As well as a financial crisis we face an environmental crisis. We need major public investment to tackle the current recession, and prepare us for a low-carbon future. We should reform taxes so we spend 'better', penalising pollution and financial speculation, while focusing on programmes like home insulation to generate jobs and help our carbon transition.

Main messengers: Green party, Green New Deal Group³⁶

5. Future that works

Austerity isn't working, just like the economy is not working for ordinary people. We face a lost decade unless the Government focuses on generating the jobs and prosperity that people need, tackling unemployment and the rising cost of living, and creating a better future for our children.

Main messengers: Trade Union Congress³⁷

6. Prosperity without growth

Our addiction to debt is driven by our addiction to economic growth. Our economic model is unsustainable: based on the idea we can consume and grow forever, when in fact the planet's resources are already in scarce supply, particularly fossil fuels. We need to transition to a new kind of economy that cares about more than material welfare; that maximises our quality of life instead of GDP.

Main messengers: Transition Towns³⁸

How strong are these alternatives?

Reminding ourselves of the criteria for an effective political story it becomes clear that not one of the six narratives above are strong enough to take on the Government's economic narrative yet.

An effective opponent to the austerity story must be

- consistent
- memorable
- full of vivid images and emotional metaphors
- simple enough to be readily understood and retold.

While all the current challengers have elements of strength and weakness, none tick all the boxes. They are also difficult to analyse in story terms – they do not all involve heroes and villains, challenges, choices or explicit morals.

Nevertheless, each does present a strong starting point for how me might construct a genuine rival to the austerity story.

1. Too far too fast

Main Strength: Starts where public opinion is, taking into account people's concerns about debt and their belief that austerity is necessary for the economy. It engages with the frames in the austerity story, recognising that this is the dominant economic narrative.

Main Weakness: By using your opponents' frames you reinforce them. 'Too far too fast' accepts that austerity is necessary and that paying off the deficit is a primary concern of economic policy. By activating government frames, Labour are strengthening the austerity story – a story in which they are the villains, addicted to spending and racking up mountains of debt. This is like playing a game where your opponent has set the rules: the odds of winning are stacked against you.

2. Bad economics

Main Strength: Attacks the premises of the austerity story and gives a coherent account of what is happening in the economy. Bad economics is a specific response to the argument that there is no alternative to austerity, rather than a full diagnosis of what is happening in the British economy. It is a consistent response, it creates new frames for debate, such as the need for economic growth.

Main Weakness: This argument has a clear logic but little emotional appeal. It tends to be steeped in academic language, and lacks the simplicity of the argument for deficit reduction -we've maxed out our credit card. For example, Paul

Krugman compares austerity to applying leeches to a sick patient in medieval times.³⁹ This is too complex. To understand this analogy, I have to know that hundreds of years ago leeches were used as a medical treatment in the mistaken belief that this was an ineffective cure for illness.

3. Tax not cuts

Main Strength: Offers a strong reframe which also attacks the austerity story. By telling us that spending cuts are politically motivated it recasts the Government as villains, trying to convince us of the need for cuts which are, in reality, unnecessary. This undermines the messages and messengers of the austerity story while engaging with the government version of events. It reframes the debate about deficit reduction to focus on taxes rather than spending, arguing that people who are avoiding tax and the banks that caused the crisis should be paying back what they owe.

Main Weakness: It is an uphill battle to argue we need no spending cuts whatsoever when almost two thirds of the population believe they are necessary. Tax not cuts ignores where public opinion currently is and doesn't provide a bridge between its arguments and people's perceptions of the economy.

4. Green New Deal

Main Strength: Tells a fuller story about the economy and the challenges it faces. By talking about the need for green investment this argument frames the economy as something to do with more than debt. It goes beyond bad economics to talk about more than the deficit.

Main Weakness: Ignores the dominance of the austerity story and focuses its messaging on alternative economic proposals. Like bad economics, the Green New Deal is more focused on logic than emotion and is quick to outline solutions to an economic and environmental crisis that most people either don't acknowledge, understand or see as a priority.

5. Future that works

Main Strength: Offers strong new frames for debate that start where people are, and uses accessible language. The TUC conducted research to identify economic issues other than debt that people care about – jobs, the cost of living, the future – and developed messaging to tap into public fears that our economy is entering a lost decade. It uses children to represent our future rather than economic indicators. It attacks austerity but doesn't solely focus on current government policy.

Main Weakness: This is the best opponent to the austerity story in many respects but it does not offer vivid images or metaphors that can counteract the national credit card. It limits itself to the problems with government policy and suggests different government policy is the solution.

6. Prosperity without growth

Main Strength: Engages with debt frames without accepting the frames of the austerity story. Reframes debt as driven by consumption and tells a big picture story about what's wrong with the economy and what needs to change.

Main Weakness: Makes a rational not emotional appeal based on issues that are not currently of major concern to people in Britain. There is an extensive body of literature about why people find it difficult to engage with arguments about the environment that are presented this way.⁴⁰⁻⁴¹ But critically this message introduces frames and concepts (e.g. peak oil, low carbon transition, well-being) that there is little popular knowledge of, without using simple metaphors or analogies.

Why are the alternatives losing out?

We interviewed 18 experts with a professional background in framing or communications. They included academics, print and broadcast journalists who cover economic issues, pollsters and directors of both policy and communications. Each was asked the same set of questions about how economic arguments were being framed. They were not shown the lists of narratives and counter-narratives compiled above.

There was a clear agreement that the dominant story about the economy was the Government's. Most interviewees highlighted how well the austerity story is framed and told, while acknowledging a range of factors beyond communications that influence public opinions around the economy.

When we asked them to tell a story told by those who oppose austerity, no two people gave us the same one. Some gave us similar narratives and messages, and others told us stories they felt were weak opponents to austerity. Several claimed they could not tell a story at all.

None were able to recall their images or metaphors like they could those in the austerity story.

All agreed that the Government's opponents are underperforming – that the story they are telling is not an effective challenge to supporters of austerity. Their responses suggest there are three areas in which the Government's opponents are weakest.

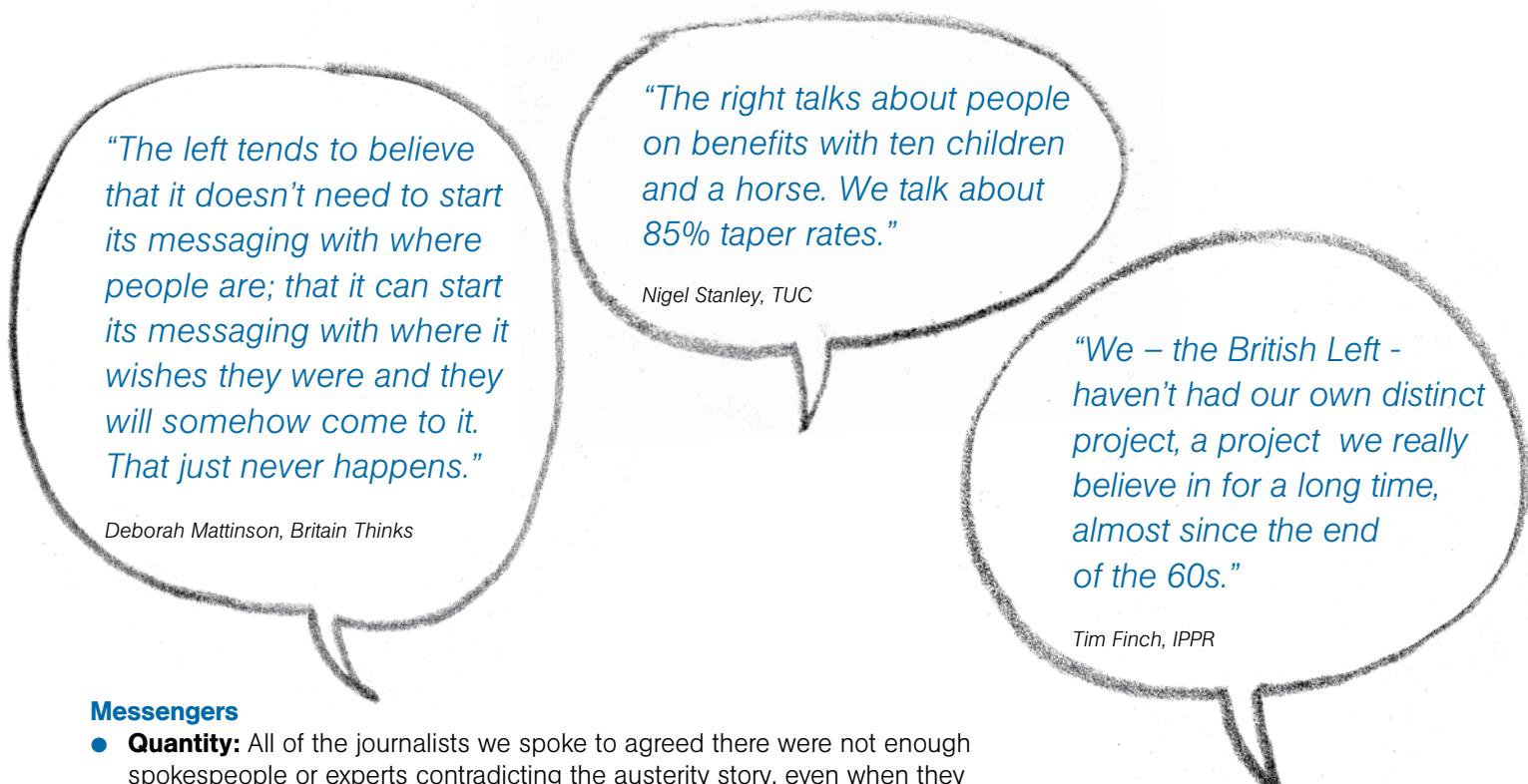
Framing

- **Using government frames:** The austerity story sets the terms of debate around the economy so that the government's policies are the only ones available. Accepting the frames of the austerity story is like playing a game with a loaded dice.⁴² Our experts gave numerous examples of instances where those opposed to austerity would invoke it, e.g. by saying we could not afford to pay for Thatcher's funeral or Trident renewal, which accepts the idea that Britain is broke.
- **Using negative frames:** The focus on reactive, anti-cuts messaging without having positive alternatives for the economy was repeatedly highlighted as a weak approach. Many felt it suggested 'winding the clock back' to the economy of the 1990s or early 2000s, which was backward looking and unlikely to be popular.
- **Failing to connect with the public mood:** In general interviewees felt government opponents tell stories that do not start where people are. At their worst, they are tone deaf, ignoring the concerns of most people that the austerity story manages to address e.g. fear of debt. A couple of commentators felt this was due to a lack of insight but some attributed it to arrogance.



Storytelling

- **No single story:** It is perhaps not surprising that there are a range of different narratives opposing the austerity story. However, all of our experts highlighted a lack of unity as a stumbling block to challenging the Government. Of those that identified one or more alternative stories there was little agreement as to which alternative was most popular or dominant.
- **Too much complexity:** Simplicity was highlighted as key to effective storytelling. Unfortunately our interviewees felt most arguments against austerity were too complex, and used 'academic' or 'technocratic' language. A few experts pointed to a fixation with facts over human stories and personal anecdote. Most polling supports the need for simplicity when communicating about the economy – when people do not understand a term they cannot engage with it.
- **No powerful imagery:** The strength of the credit card metaphor was a recurring theme in interviews. No one felt that alternative narratives had found imagery to match it. Some said this was because Keynesian economics was by its nature harder to communicate, but many disagreed with this and gave examples of ways to argue against the Government's language using alternative examples.



Messengers

- **Quantity:** All of the journalists we spoke to agreed there were not enough spokespeople or experts contradicting the austerity story, even when they faced a sympathetic hearing. One producer gave an anecdote of calling 20 people who opposed the Government before they found one person willing to come onto TV for a live debate, while the first supporter of the Government they spoke to agreed to be on their show. If there are fewer people telling an alternative to the austerity story, there are fewer people challenging government frames and changing the terms of the debate.
- **Quality:** Many of our experts said the credibility of those opposing the austerity story was an issue. The Labour party was highlighted as a problematic messenger because it had control of the economy in the decade leading up to the financial crash. Some cited a lack of economic literacy as a problem, but many more cited a lack of repetition and message discipline, hallmarks of government communications. No one we interviewed said that these problems were insurmountable. Quantity was more frequently cited as a problem than quality.
- **Confidence:** Under-confidence was identified as a key difference between pro- and anti-austerity spokespeople. One interviewee remarked that even government spokespeople with a poor grasp of economics were confident media performers and able to deliver government messages because these messages are simple.

- **Outriders:** The most commonly referenced ‘success’ in interviews was the way groups like UK Uncut had pushed tax avoidance up the political and economic agenda. Several experts referred to the role that ‘outrider’ groups play in changing the terms of debate, but with the exception of tax and the living wage, some interviewees felt pro-austerity outriders like the Taxpayers’ Alliance did a better job in pulling in the same direction as each other.

“When I go on TV and radio sometimes I feel a little bit isolated...”

Owen Jones, *The Independent*

“You can’t separate the message from the messenger, however much you might want to try.”

Deborah Mattinson, *Britain Thinks*

It’s difficult now for Labour to get across a message of change on the economy. Labour wasn’t just in power when economy tanked; it had made no attempts at serious economic reform prior to the crash.

Tim Finch, IPPR

“For the most part the media is trying to represent all points of view, but if we don’t have a guest there is only so far we can do that.”

Producer, primetime national news programme

“Without a clearer sense of alternatives, the left isn’t tooled up for economic debate.”

Aditya Chakrabortty, *Guardian*

Box 2: The Media

The role of the media in shaping economic narratives and public opinion is outside the scope of this paper, but it was a recurring theme of our interviews. These are some of the points that were raised:

- **Media remains powerful:** No one discounted the power of print or broadcast media in shaping the economic agenda and setting the terms of debate. Most saw journalists as key opinion formers and gate-keepers to public opinion.
- **Journalists not neutral:** There was strong agreement that there was a pro-austerity bias in the media, supported by the journalists we interviewed. What was not explored was whether this was a function of weak storytelling in the anti-austerity camp, under-resourced media relations, or if the mainstream media had a stake in supporting the Government agenda.
- **Lack of economic literacy:** One expert believed there are fewer journalists across the media landscape capable of scrutinising complex economic arguments than ten years ago. If this is the case, the need to tell a compelling story becomes even greater.

Finding Our Frames

"We don't just want to know what people think, we want to know what messages work the best and are most effective."

Clifford Singer, Digital Action Lab

What are the frames that opponents of austerity should be using to defeat austerity narratives and tell their own story?

A definitive answer is beyond the scope of this paper. Opponents must develop their own frames based on their values and the type of economy they want to see. This section tries to start the process by identifying what seven frames might look like that could counteract those in the austerity story.

We have developed the frames using two criteria:

1. They respond to and challenge the austerity story, since that is the way many people in Britain understand our economy
2. They go with the grain of public opinion, and are likely to resonate with a majority of people

1. Casino economy

The frame: Our economy has become a casino. We let our banks get too big and complex, gambling our money and risking our future. Everything is fake, we're not making anything real or valuable, too much rests on chance rather than skill. There is a lot of money flowing round it but few of us end up richer. Ultimately, the system is rigged against us.

Why we need it: A new story needs vivid imagery to stick in people's minds. A casino is a strong frame for understanding the economy if you want to make the case for structural reforms to it. Casinos are associated with excess, unearned wealth and unfair stakes. They can be used to symbolise the boom years, in which we racked up unsustainable debts and let our economy become dominated by finance. The point is not that the UK economy is exactly analogous to a casino, just as it is unlikely that George Osborne really believes public debt is exactly the same as credit card debt. But both metaphors offer ways of understanding the world that make you more likely to endorse certain policies.

Activating the frame: Betting and gambling are words that already carry negative associations in our minds, just as investment banking is sometimes known as casino banking. To build this frame in popular consciousness opponents of austerity need to repeat the phrase "casino economy" as often as possible and to offer simple



explanations that support this phrase, e.g. talking about professional gamblers in the City. Most important is to stress that the casino is still open for business – this is what caused the financial crisis and little has changed since.

Why it could be powerful: The casino frame taps into people's fears that we are no more protected from financial crisis than we were in 2008.⁴³ It uses imagery that has strong and negative associations to highlight the scale of what has gone wrong in our economy.

2. Treading water

The frame: The point of the economy is progress. For things to be better tomorrow than they are today, and for our children to be better off than we are now. But we're not making any progress. In fact, for some time we've been running just to stand still.



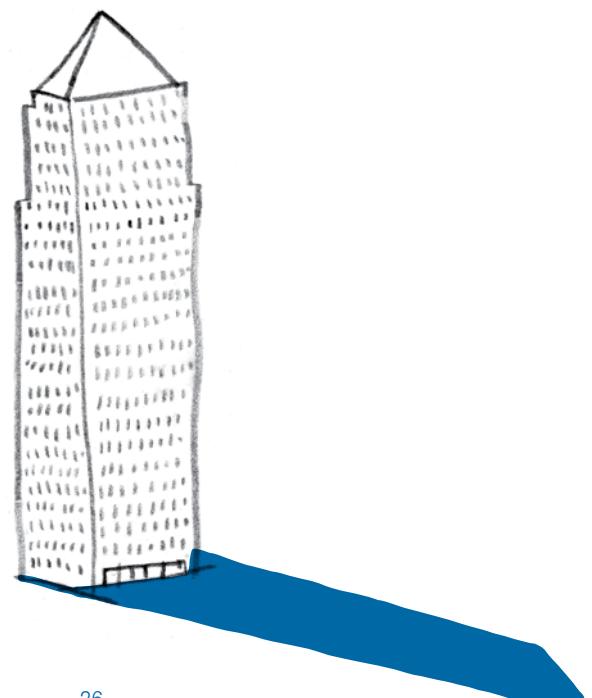
Why we need it: The Coalition has successfully framed austerity as the medicine we need, talking about the pain it causes is unlikely to dent peoples' belief that it is necessary. Instead we need a new frame that taps into people's desire for progress and improvement. The image of treading water is easy to understand and provides a simple metaphor for what is going on in the economy. It taps into the pessimism people feel about the future and attacks the impact austerity is having rather than the policies themselves. It tells us that our economy is stagnating – we're going nowhere fast. It is about struggle without progress, pain without gain: working hard to pay bills that keep on rising while your wages stay the same; trying to afford university for your children; a country that is suffering but not moving forward.

Activating this frame: Using metaphors that symbolise hard work and slow/no progress; stagnation, treadmill, running to a standstill, treading water. Talking about the struggle people face to make ends meet, saying that things are hard and they're not getting better.

Why it could be powerful: People are pessimistic about the economy – YouGov recently found 53% believe they are worse off now than in 2010.⁴⁴ This has translated into a desire for the Government to prioritise growth, even at the expense of the deficit. But growth is an economic indicator; it is a fact, not a frame. What sits behind it is a desire for progress – for things to be better for us and our children. By tapping into this desire for progress, the treading water frame is engaging people's emotions about the economy, and asking them whether it is delivering what they really want.

3. Big bad banks

The frame: The people who caused the financial crisis are not paying for it. Our banks are too big and too powerful; too big to fail and too big to control. Bankers have been reckless with our economy without



facing the consequences of their actions. They continue to take big risks, receive huge bonuses and live lives of excess.

Why we need it: Banks are conspicuous by their absence in the austerity story, which frames the financial crisis as a spending crisis to make government the villain. Bringing banks and bankers into a narrative about the economy creates a strong challenge to the frame that blames government spending. Bankers act as a storybook villain, their continued wealth and the lives of excess they lead still anger people. They, unlike us, seem unaffected by the bailouts and unaccountable for their actions.

Activating the frame: The word ‘banker’ already evokes negative connotations of recklessness, excess, undeserved privilege and arrogance. A few words will activate the frame because it is so established in public discourse: bonuses, taxpayer-funded banks or bailed out banks, bankers, RBS, taxpayer bailout, City excess, financial crash/crisis. In order to frame banks as villains who have escaped justice, their affluence also needs to be repeatedly associated with our economic ruin. Their wealth is an affront because of their actions.

Why it could be powerful: Negative frames about bankers already exist and are incredibly strong in British society. Poll after poll confirms this. A majority of people in Britain still believe bankers and not the Government caused the 2008 crash and that the last two governments have been ‘too soft’ on regulating banks.⁴⁵

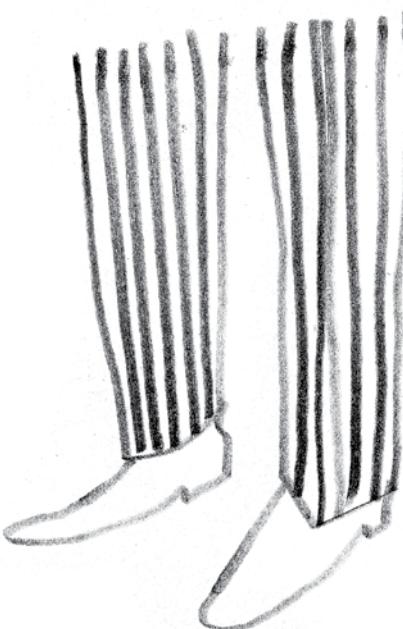
4. Big guys and little guys

The frame: There are two types of people in the economy: the big guys and the little guys. The little guys work hard, play by the rules and pay what they owe but often don’t get a fair deal. The big guys make the rules but they think they don’t apply to them. They don’t pay their share or do what’s right but they have money, power and friends in high places as well as armies of lawyers, lobbyists and PR people.

Why we need it: This frame identifies an unlevel playing field as a sign of dysfunction in our economy. It is a way to talk about inequality that will resonate with large numbers of people. It asks people to identify with the little guy – people who try their best but are ultimately powerless and deserve better than they get. We need this frame because it confirms what many intuitively feel; that the system is rigged. It taps into the feelings we have that we are small and powerless, and the anger we feel at those who never face the music.

Activating this frame: Referring to the 1%, talking about double standards, uneven playing fields, people to whom rules don’t seem to apply and who live in a bubble, are ways of framing the economy in terms of the big guys and little guys. As is talking about the rich and powerful and the advantages they have – lawyers, lobbyists and PR people, friends in high places – and juxtaposing them with ‘little guys’: the hard working people who play by the rules, face the consequences of their actions and pay their way in the world.

Why it could be powerful: From tax dodgers⁴⁶ to white collar criminals, national journalists to MPs who fiddled expenses, there is a growing feeling of anger and dissatisfaction with those at the top. This frame channelling that anger and tells us it is a feature of our economy, an injustice and double standard that plays out again and again.⁴⁷



5. Jobs Gap

What is the frame: There are people in this country who want work but can't find it. There are people in this country who work hard and don't get fair pay. There are almost a million young people who are unemployed. The biggest challenge our economy faces is how to get Britain working again and provide decent jobs for the millions of people that want them.

Why we need it: Jobs are a powerful frame to undermine the austerity story, which rests on the assumption that there are jobs for those who want them. Rather than



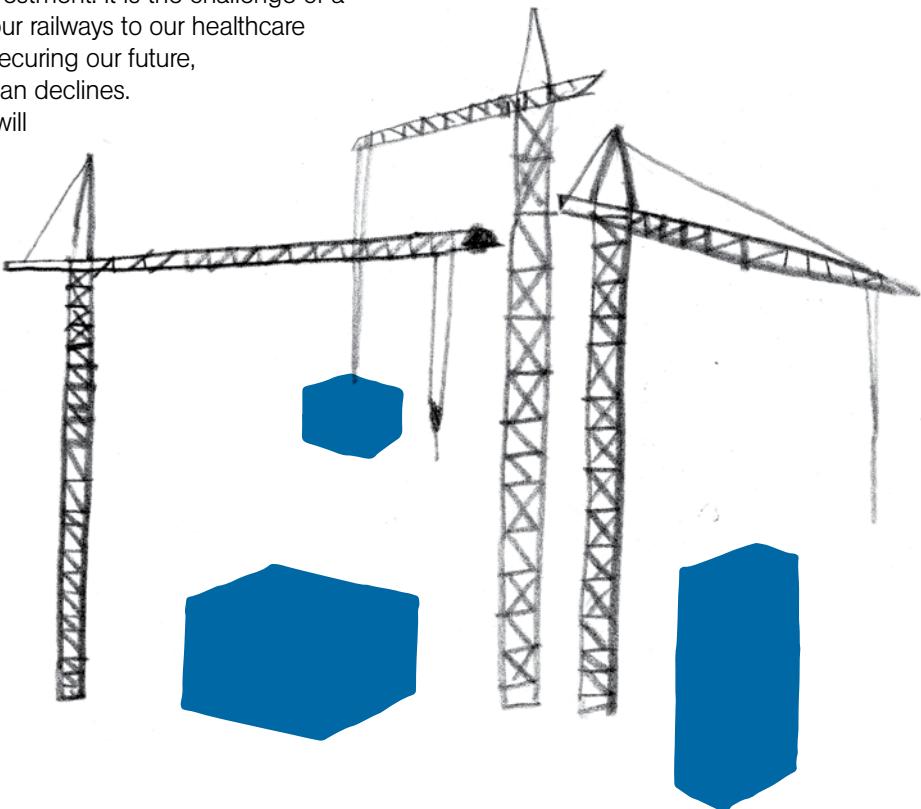
engaging in a debate about welfare, opponents of austerity need to reframe the debate to focus it on work: the lack of good jobs in the economy; the fact that people who work cannot support themselves with their pay; the poor opportunities for young people.

Activating this frame: Talking about unemployment, youth unemployment, no jobs, people who want to work but can't, and jobs that don't pay the bills.

Why it could be powerful: Unemployment remains a major concern for many people in Britain and a source of fear for those who have jobs. Sympathy for unemployed young people is very high.

6. Time for renewal

The frame: Our economy is in urgent need of investment. It is the challenge of a generation. Everything that made us great, from our railways to our healthcare system needs to be rebuilt. Investment is about securing our future, about making sure the country improves rather than declines. Investment is a smart use of public money – we will all reap the benefits in the future.



Why we need it: Opponents of austerity need an alternative focus for government's energies to spending cuts, and investment is the strongest on offer. Framing investment as something we cannot afford not to do forces people to be forward-looking and consider the impact austerity has on our future. Arguing to protect institutions from cuts is weaker than arguing for them to be renewed.

Activating the frame: Talking about the need for investment and infrastructure, stimulating the economy, rebuilding and renewing it.

Why it could be powerful: At the moment the Government is called on to boost growth through infrastructure spending. But spending buys into the economy described

in the austerity story. The Government needs to be reframed as an investor – someone who can make money instead of spending it and use its power wisely.

7. Austerity is a smokescreen

The frame: Austerity isn't about economics, it's about politics. The coalition and George Osborne are using the deficit as an excuse to do what they have wanted to do for years: shrink the state, privatise the NHS and take away support for those who need it. We cannot trust them, they care more about politics than what is best for the country. They aren't out to help ordinary people, but their wealthy friends who fund them.

Why we need it: To challenge the Government's story about the economy we need to question their credibility as messengers. Turning the Coalition into villains explains why they are enacting austerity and calls all of their frames and messages into question.

Activating this frame: Using the image of a smokescreen or talking about the Government's agenda is a good way of framing austerity as political. Associating spending cuts with George Osborne in particular, is a way to raise doubts about whether they are the right thing for the country. Using the language of choice rather than necessity to remind people there are alternatives to government austerity.

Why it could be powerful: This frame taps into existing negative perceptions about the Coalition and particularly the Conservatives. In 2012, when YouGov polled people about the Conservative party, more than 40% thought they were the "party of the rich", and 28% believed that the party did not care enough about the "very poor and vulnerable".⁴⁹ There is even some evidence to suggest George Osborne's unpopularity undermines support for austerity policies; ahead of this year's Budget Ipsos MORI found they were 15% less popular when the Chancellor's name was attached to them.⁵⁰



Towards a new story

Conclusion

The battle for the economic narrative will be won with stories, not statistics. Armed with facts alone, opponents of austerity stand little chance against a story that is well developed, well told and widely believed.

They need to tell a story that talks to the people they want to engage with, not at them. And they need to accept that it might sound different to the one they would normally tell. They need to develop frames for debate that understand, but are not led by public opinion and that are rooted in the values they hold. They need to recognise what resonates about the austerity story and respond to it – it is too powerful to shy away from.

That's the easy bit. Those that want to develop a real challenger to austerity narratives have a number of other tasks.

1. Coordination

The more people telling a similar story well, the more powerful that story is likely to become. Sharing and coordinating stories, frames and research is an essential first step for those who want to create a different economic narrative.

Coordination isn't about telling identical stories; it's about agreeing common frames for debate and the strongest lines to take against austerity. It allows different messengers to use similar language and imagery to reinforce the same frames, whilst allowing room for outriders and different areas of focus.

Without deliberate and ongoing cooperation – such as meeting to discuss and agree how to communicate about the economy – opponents of austerity risk being drowned out.

2. Testing

This paper has used publicly available surveys to gauge opinions. Anyone serious about developing a new story on the economy will need to research and test their frames and messages.

Testing allows you to find the most effective way to engage people with your ideas and get insight into what will persuade those who do not already agree with you. This does not require compromising your values, but being willing to try different things to find out what works best.

Unless you test your story – through everything from polling and focus groups to direct feedback from your target audience – you risk it falling on deaf ears.

3. Messengers

Stories have no power unless they are being communicated. Opponents of austerity need credible messengers and fierce message discipline to try and ensure their views get a fair hearing.

The more a frame or value is activated the stronger it becomes. So opponents of austerity need to take every opportunity they can to tell their story. This means doing more media and lots and lots (and lots) of repetition – just as the austerity story has been told and retold for a number of years.

Even a perfect story will have no power unless there is someone to tell it. A new story needs legions of trained messengers to disseminate it.

Another story

We end with another story about Britain. It takes the frames from the previous section to show the process that opponents of austerity must begin if they want to reframe how we see the economy.

Our economy has become a casino.

**Britain used to be a country where people invented and made things.
Then we decided the easy money was in money. We let the City of London grow larger and larger until it dwarfed the rest of the economy.**

We felt like we were getting richer, when in fact bankers were making high stakes bets, taking big risks in order to make huge profits. Then the banks gambled everything and lost. The financial system crashed.

We were given no choice: we had to use public money to bail out the banks or risk our economy collapsing. Now, five years on, bankers have gone back to business as usual, taking lavish bonuses while the rest of us pick up the bill for their recklessness.

But that's not all that's wrong with our economy. We live in a country where the rich and powerful play by their own set of rules, while the rest of us struggle to get by. Where there are people who want to work but cannot find a job, and many that do work who don't take home enough to pay the bills. Instead of things getting better, for us and our children, we're running to stand still.

We can't trust the Coalition to tackle this. They're on the side of the people who fund them: big companies and wealthy bankers. The financial crisis gave them a chance to do what they've always wanted to do: sack nurses, close fire stations and cut benefits to disabled people.

Our economy is down but not out. We need to focus on rebuilding what we had and investing in a better future. We will need to make big changes to create an economy that makes things other than debt. It will not be easy or quick. We need to invest in old industries like manufacturing, as well as new ones like green industries and new technologies. And we need to invest in the people of Britain.

Because we are the ones who can rebuild the country in the years to come.

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 - Aditya Chakrabortty, Economics Leader Writer, Guardian
 - Timothy Davies, Author of Compass thinkpiece, 'The challenge for progressives: change the discourse'
 - Ruth Davis, Chief Policy Advisor, Greenpeace
 - Tim Finch, Director of Communications, IPPR
 - Alan Finlayson, Professor of Political and Social Theory, University of East Anglia
 - Rich Hawkins, Director, Public Interest Research Centre
 - Symon Hill, Associate Director, Ekklesia
 - Owen Jones, Columnist, The Independent
 - Neal Lawson, Chair, Compass
 - George Marshall, Director of Projects, Climate Outreach and Information Network
 - Deborah Mattinson, Founder & Director, Britain Thinks
 - Canon Dr Angus Richie, Director, Contextual Theology Centre
 - Prof. Steve Schifferes, Professor, City University London
 - Clifford Singer, Founder, Digital Action Lab
 - Nigel Stanley, Head of Campaigns and Communications, Trades Union Congress
- Off the record interviews conducted between March and July 2013:**
- Producer, primetime national news programme
 - Former Downing Street Special Adviser
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Authors: Carys Afoko and Daniel Vockins

Background research by: Luke Wreford

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new economics foundation

3 Jonathan Street
London SE11 5NH
United Kingdom

Telephone: +44 (0)20 7820 6300

Facsimile: +44 (0)20 7820 6301

E-mail: info@neweconomics.org

Website: www.neweconomics.org

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