



**Technology, Employment and the Path to End
Discrimination – a Polemic**

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Abstract

Over a comparatively short period the locution ‘going for growth’ has migrated from the purely political arena into common vernacular discourse, invoked by both the left and right of the UK political spectrum (Rosamond, 2019). Such phraseology inferring a determined focus by those both in – and aspiring to power, to move the organs of the state towards an instituted path of national material economic growth. The political economic logics – all agreed upon – accords priority to the economic imperative of growth. Recognised across the spectrum as essential to the future fiscal health and social stability of the state, as it negotiates the post-Brexit vicissitudes of global competition.

Substantively, twin key essential elements to growth reside in the ability of the state to capture – through internal and external processes, vital investment streams. These streams coupled to harnessing technological innovation, result in the creation of new products, services and processes. Being crucial for generating high value-added jobs, which in turn, significantly contribute to the taxable income of the UK Exchequer.

However, this relationship is composite and structured. Indeed, technological advancement, which often accompanies the corporate sector, inclines to cluster in silos of entrenched economic and industrial capital (Garnsey, & Heffernan, 2005; Smith, & Ibrahim, 2006). Characteristically, having latent effects on social structure, as noted by Tony Benn in his famous words, ‘science and technology are just the latest expression of power and that those who control them have become the new bosses’ (Benn, 1971: 23). With this assertion in mind, we can ask to what extent has this critique of technology – when mapped to deterministic silos, as noted by luminaries such as Benn – played out in lieu of the increasing march towards Artificial Intelligence (AI) and governance structures which afford little input from lay persons affected by the technologies?

In this conference paper, I aim to problematise the left/right rhetoric of ‘growth’ as it pertains to AI, and its copiously vaulted and promised affordances of the zero-sum equation of growth. By employing the late Tony Benn’s critique of technology (Benn, 1979 [1971]: 23), through formative structure (Benn, 2003), this paper asks a series of probing and polemical questions the sector need be mindful of as the technology increasingly permeates through our private and working lives.

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Introduction: Conceptualising Growth?

In 1971 the late Tony Benn (1925-2014) uttered these profound words ‘science and technology are just the latest expression of power and that those who control them have become the new bosses’ (Benn, 1979 [1971]: 23). In providing some brief background context, in the summer of 1966 Benn was made the Minister of Technology until the Labour defeat of 1970, in time, returning to the Cabinet as the Secretary of State for Industry in March 1974. As I will attempt to illustrate today, his prophetic words have profound resonance at this moment, perhaps more than ever.

Why do we have a concern for economic growth, a concern of sufficient magnitude to compel both the left and the right of the political spectrum to invest themselves with it?

Well, certainly a cluster of complex reasons for this investment are acutely embedded into our needs as modern ‘civilised’ Homo Sapiens Sapiens. Indeed, we humans have many needs, characterised by the axis of the physical, emotional, mental and the spiritual (White, 1974). Such needs are intrinsic to the nature of our embodiment, our appreciation being formed through the early pioneering work of Maslow (1943, 1987) and others (Taormina, & Gao, 2013). However, although these cardinals of being are all interconnected through the body – ascribed to the self – it is the physical component of this human condition that primarily interests those who are concerned with growth. Growth is an extension of the embodiment of being, into the material realm, often via economics.

Etymologically, ‘growth’ is a wonderful composite, it both denotes and connotes a positive aspect to our embodiment, with discursive roots dating back into the Western civilising (I use that word advisedly) tradition. Colloquially, when we think about and conceptualise growth, we imagine the elimination of ‘Want’, of ‘Need’, ‘Misery’ and ‘Suffering’. Growth displays fixity as something achievable by the political class, this connotative ability to accomplish extends to the state. If the state can prepare the ground – can set the initial conditions – then growth will ensue. A chain of events thus follows the logics of growth which assuredly arises in the abatement and/or elimination of the plaguing ills just mentioned. Hypothetically, the elimination of discrimination is also conceivable within the growth framework. By way of example, the Race Discrimination Bill of 1960 being brought to Parliament for a second reading following the 1959 General Election, delivered to the House by the peerless Archibald Fenner Brockway (1888-1988), where it received enthusiastic support from none other than Tony Benn amongst others.

Measured, weighted, offset and a myriad of other economic terms are often brought to bear in the observation of the effect and/or deficits of growth (Rosamond, 2019). It could be argued in the zeitgeist of widespread societal performativity, that it is the symbolic deployment of the term which affords structuring the underlying logic(s) of its use. Making it a valuable communicative resource, often employed within political discourse, free to be used and deployed by both left and right of the spectrum. Indeed, it is (to borrow from our U.S. colleagues), the ‘go to’ term of the moment, the phrase of choice in the neoliberal era (Monbiot, & Hutchison, 2024). Growth is (un)measurable, inherently positive, both implicitly and explicitly suggestive that some action is being actively taken to help, redress and empower the polity. Finally, the term allows for change to be instituted by the state in dynamical terms both across micrological and macrological concerns.

Why Growth?

Modern societies, post-modern late capitalist neoliberal societies need growth, one could argue that civilisation itself needs growth (Monbiot, & Hutchison, 2024). Akin to the new-born baby, who must grow into the child; growth is an indispensable aspect of the human condition – spiritual, emotional,

mental and physical. Through an empirical lens afforded by political critique, equally the left and the right have rallied this word and all of the accompanying discursive signification attached to it, to lay claim and justify their ideological approaches to governance. Explicitly now, in the current conditions of general malaise afflicting the West and these Isles, we often hear 'X, Y and Z cannot be explored as a policy mechanism unless we (the nation), achieve growth', often set as a fundamental precondition to government action. It is growth, and the spectre of the loss and/or curtailment of growth that so much politically informed policy has been enacted. This enactment resonated acutely in the years following the 2008 Financial Crisis. This fractious period representing a socio-economic-political inflection point, a conjectural moment for national and global affairs, with acute resonance here in the West. Scholars who reside within the discipline of supply-side economics often state that we, as a Western block, have failed to recover from the effects of this collapse (see, Hochschild, 2010; Ciornei, & Ross, 2021).

Performance vs Performativity?

Arguably, the public sphere is a world of political performativity (Glass, & Rose-Redwood, 2014). In epistemological terms this conceivably could be due to the prevalence and pervasiveness of mass communications media, augmented and enhanced by the relatively recent addition to the digital landscape of social media. Performances increasingly scaffold our lives, no domain of contemporary public life is immune, attaining an apogee in contemporary neoliberal politics. The public, performative downplaying of 'knee-jerk' reactions to events which are then re-spun through central headquarters as if they were authentically embedded into policy frameworks is a common and unfortunate feature of modern political discourse. A reactionary politics to media led public concern, movement or even outcry and latterly hysteria. Through this lens, growth is a 'nudging' device utilised by both the left and right of the political spectrum.

Public understanding and conceptualisation of the term growth is particularly susceptible to the politics of performativity (Glass, & Rose-Redwood, 2014). Indeed, figures, whether directly from the various organs of government – mediated through mass communications – or from the 'independent' Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) can take on hues, shapes and mathematical geometries to fit and/or retrofit political necessities. Functionally adopted until the 'crises' has passed and another equally urgent concern avails public discourse. 'Growth' is a term discursively deployed as an action of governmental performativity, providing legitimacy to policy and actions that are by all measures diametrically apostate of common sense understandings of growth. Thus, viewed through the lens of the neoliberal order, cuts that shrink the state can be presented (I prefer performed) as necessary sacrifices on the path to growth, the promise of national renewal.

Rhetorically, we must ask and problematise the query, how did we get here? This moment, where our eyes and experiences of the public sphere inform us of a shared belonging that recounts a radically different story. Observing the rising prices of essentials such as groceries and utilities, along with the visceral urban decay, homelessness, and deteriorating infrastructure, which reveal a stark contrasted parallel world to the optimistic narrative promoted by the 'going for growth' political class. Recently, the Labour government led by Sir Kier Starmer, through the Prime Minters Office and other organs of the state, has outlined a series of lectern led proposals, heralding the stratospheric rise and affordances of growth. A growth characterised as unique, magnificent even, one to be achieved only with and through adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Euphemistically this has been marketed as the 'blueprint to turbocharge AI', its advocates offer the promise to foster a somewhat unprecedented 'decade of national renewal' for the UK¹. Growth by other terminology, we must

¹ Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, The Rt Hon Peter Kyle MP, The Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KCB KC MP and The Rt Hon Rachel Reeves MP. *Prime Minister sets out blueprint to turbocharge AI*. (2025) Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-sets-out-blueprint-to-turbocharge-ai> (Accessed: 20 March 2025).

wonder what the late Tony Benn would have made of this AI, Prime Ministerial backed performativity.

Power via Technology in Search of Growth – Case Study

I would like to remind us all of Benn's 1971 words: 'science and technology are just the latest expression of power and that those who control them have become the new bosses' (Benn, 1979 [1971]: 23). With these words re-inserted in our minds, I would like to move to invite you to consider a simple experiment that I devised. In the spirit of experimentation, I have created a second slide-deck to accompany my talk today. The generated content overlaid onto the following slide was created with and by AI, the platform used for their 'creation' is 'free' of cost at the point of use, the algorithmic system is called Gamma AI. In providing background, the company was founded in 2020 and describes itself as a transformer in business presentations.² It is U.S. based, its corporate aims are to transform the language of business³, ideas and how information spreads. I would like to add, that I have employed AI for the following slide alone, presented on the screen, NOT for my written conference work comprising what we are discussing today. Just to be clear, any glaring errors in this paper are mine.

Notwithstanding, engaging AI software is an everyday action for millions upon millions, and such use-cases will only continue to escalate as time progresses and the technology permeates further into our everyday professional and private lives. Therefore, in querying the business model, where is value? One potential answer resides in the use of the software saving time in constructing the PowerPoint slides. However, this is only one aspect of the transactional relationship with Gamma AI. The other principal characteristic is veiled, the data submitted will undoubtedly be added to a Large Language Model (LLM) database, to be traded to other AI corporates, it is effectively monetised via a process known as curating corpora (Villalobos, *et al.*, 2024). The mere 15 kilobytes (KB) of data submitted as written prompts to create these AI generated slides will aggregate upwards to a determinate scaler value via this mode of production. Thus aggregated, it will bolster Gamma AI's, corporate monetary value and if enough data is aggregated, the company will perhaps be acquired through mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity. Eventually to become part of a larger corporate body, this neoliberal schema (Monbiot, & Hutchison, 2024), is the probable destiny of my modest input of data.

If we re-frame my discrete experiment through the lens of critique offered by Benn, we can discern that I, as the recipient of a free software tool have negligible/if any, input, control, say or stake in the encounter, via a minimalised user interface (UI) interaction with it. The relationship is diametrically and fundamentally unbalanced: in economic terms, in terms of privacy and of course localised notions and identifications of growth. The relationship is akin to an inverted iceberg, my speck of kilobyte (KB) data input supports a large and vast economic network that remains concealed, unknown. Which, as an edifice – resides, due to the global nature of hyper-modern commerce, to include AI – beyond private, public and it could be claimed, even beyond governmental scrutiny (see, Mackenzie-Gray Scott, & Edwards, 2024).

Therefore, it can be discerned that relative to this interaction with the tool, growth resides in my saving of ~2 hours to create a PowerPoint Presentation. However, the scale of my discrete economic growth resides outside of this miniscule time window. Through the critique offered by Benn, implicitly, the use-case for the tool is a form of modern wealth extraction. Prompts, ideas and input labour are harvested in an offering to save time. Regardless of leaving aside the long-term impact on personal cognitive ability – a residual side-effect known as cognitive offloading (Gerlich, 2025). We

² See, <https://gamma.ai/>.

³ See, <https://www.ipmorgan.com/insights/technology/artificial-intelligence/gammas-startup-journey-the-future-of-presentations-with-ai>.

also can leave aside aesthetics, the discussion of which could potentially envelope the entire conference. Fundamentally, the relationship is exclusively a neoliberal one, the system has been provided input in the form of labour and intellectual property (IP), and in return, the user/customer has received a fractional aggregate compared to what has been invested. Indeed, it could be argued – if we scale up this relationship, as the current Labour government is determined to do – the entrenched problems become exponential, they fail to diminish. For example, NHS data, our both national and intimate personal data, proposed to be fed into the organs of offshored AI companies in the hope to find growth is indeed a frontier of concern.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude today by offering some reflections; thoughts, I hope we all can consider and take with us into our lives. We do not necessarily have to provide immediate answers to these aspects of growth as it pertains to AI, rather, we should reflect. In addition, in the spirit of this paper and in alignment with some of the thoughts of Benn (2003), these reflections are profoundly polemical in nature.

Polemical Reflection #1

We historians recognise that history does indeed rhyme. Society has been here before, the Internet and all of its multitude of affordances has become a structuralising power of our postmodern global human society, fostering and encourage new forms of interconnection and sociality (Sibilla, & Gorgoni, 2022). The changes brought about by this technology were inconceivable and unchartable 30 years ago, this same sense of unchartedness applies to AI and the coming AI revolution that we as a society are merely on the cusp of. Just as there were winners and losers of the Internet age – a cursory look at any high street or indeed major thoroughfare – will allude to that fact, it is highly probable AI will enact the same price from us, in ways that we are again unable to fully contemplate from our vantage point. There is a reason why, as of 2023, (to exemplify one of the corporate entities), Amazon enjoys a market capitalisation of 2.12 trillion USD (Jin, 2023) whilst bricks and mortar establishments are in decline. A *quid pro quo*, price paid by our built environment and ultimately our communities.

Polemical Reflection #2

Scholars have problematised the thinking of social democrats and those on the left regarding the ability of science, technology and innovation – characterised as technological determinism to solve societal ills. Debate has raised considerable scepticism that technology, as a standalone praxis, could utter in change to resolve deeply entrenched multi-dimensional systemic problems (Costa, 2022). Tony Benn took a more moderate position on the ability of science to be both scientism and humanist, he believed that technological progress has indeed improved the lives of ordinary people (Winstone, 1995).

Benn saw the value of modern technology to engage society in a ‘virtuous circle between technoscience and the modern state’ (Costa, 2022: 1350). However, being a man of his time, this positive reading of technology was reflective of its role as part of a mixed economy and subordinated to state intervention (Kimber, 2014). His diaries make clear his own transformation on this specific issue, when in 1974 at the Department of Industry, he wrote, ‘I have been driven further and further towards a real socialist position’ (Winstone, 1995: 388). Contrastingly, what society has now, with the ongoing lack of state governance of AI, is ostensible ungoverned state support (Shaw, & Graham, 2017). In short, a Frankenstein model of near absent state intervention, a characteristically modern neoliberal type of state relationship. One devoid of the checks and balances vital within the framework of such state support that would have governed highly advanced technological relationships in Benn’s time.

Just as the 1969 and subsequent Moon landings failed to solve existential problems for the world, let alone the U.S., we must be alert to the mobilisation of a related technocratic discourse. Big tech corporatised discourse about AI would wish us to collectively arrive at a juncture where we abrogate the solutions and solving of societal ills to technology. A technology which itself is located within a specific political growth discursive framework. A framework we have diminished input into, leading to failures of promise beyond the symbolic.

Polemical Reflection #3

Finally, reflections 1 and 2 lead us to the idea of social impact, input politics and who ultimately determines the decisions to be made. Within his Ministry of Technology, Benn had always advocated for technology *and* scientific progress, however, he drew a clear distinction between the expansion of scientific knowledge – knowledge for its own sake (Benn, 1989). His thoughts often counterpoised against applied research which can indeed solve societal/human problems, leading to a rise in productivity and a growth in GDP (Barrett, Hansen, Natal, & Noureldin, 2021). These two wings of ‘progress’ are predicated upon the decisions made by people residing within structures that operate with specific end goals in mind. However, there is little evidence of AI being consulted through citizenry to assess social impact. Citizen concerns will have to be regulated through the market alone, and history, as we have touched upon in this conference tends to produce outcomes that are not in adherence to the hopes, wishes and expectations of the majority. Note, the majority at this juncture of time are those who are *not* the 0.01%, and who also happen to be those who are *not* in operative control of AI.

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