

# DEMOCRACY AT THE EDGE

Understanding Populism and Power in the 21st Century



**Spot the  
Difference**

Can you spot the AI fake?

Glen Duncanson

# Introduction

My daughter's Christmas present was a ticket to see the musical Hamilton and we took her last week. She is fifteen, a keen drama student with ambitions to study PPE at university — Politics, Philosophy and Economics — and something of an inspiration for the main character within these pages. She came out of the theatre visibly lit up. Not by the choreography, though that was extraordinary. By Hamilton himself.\* By the sheer, almost deranged volume of words the man produced — 51 of the 85 Federalist Papers, written in six months, while simultaneously serving as Washington's chief aide. One song has been in my head ever since:

*'Why do you write like you're running out of time?'*

Alexander Hamilton understood something that took me longer to grasp: that ideas don't wait. That the window for changing minds — and therefore changing things — is always narrower than you think. He had a quill and an almost pathological work ethic. We have something rather different.

I was born in England on the cusp of the last quarter of the 20th century, and have since called the UK, Australia, and now the EU my home. For most of that time I blindly took free and fair elections for granted. My governments' powers were limited by laws protecting individual rights and freedoms, and I naively regarded my fifty privileged years in a liberal democracy as an unchanging human right. Looking around at my contemporaries, I don't think I'm alone.

While a little over half of all people born in the last hundred years have lived at some point within a democratic political system, fewer than one in five of the world's population today lives within a full liberal democracy — and a significant share of those who do are governed by populists. There are many forms of populism. It is the rise of right-wing populism that concerns me, and that concerns this book.

Which brings me to the tools. Generative AI is being deployed by populists and their backers to manufacture and amplify the very content you'll read about in these pages. It can also be used to fight back. The research, the script, the illustrations, the layouts — work that might have taken months was compressed into days. Generative AI did not have the idea for this book, or care whether it existed, or know why it matters. That part was mine. The quality, I should be honest, falls well short of a professional graphic novel made by real artists — and that turns out to be useful.

Look carefully at these pages. The illustrations contain errors: distorted text, inconsistencies, the occasional stray character appearing where they shouldn't. I want you to find them. Pick up a red biro, circle every fault you can spot, and treat it as a game of Spot the Difference. Because learning to notice what's wrong — to pause before accepting what merely looks plausible — is exactly the skill this book is asking you to develop. The deepfakes and manipulated stories you'll encounter online are harder to spot than a clumsy AI illustration, but the instinct is the same.

My daughter's wonder and passion inspired me to create this. Her older brother's years studying History, Politics and EU Governance shaped the questions I asked. And their younger brother — whose questions have never once stopped, whose thirst for knowledge has outpaced every teacher who's tried to keep up with him, and who at this moment is almost certainly watching YouTube Shorts — the precise target demographic for every populist algorithm — is the reader I most want to reach. He is required to read this in hard copy, pen in hand.

*Hamilton was in a hurry for good reasons. So am I.*

---

*Glen Duncanson. April 2026, York, England.*

\* The musical Hamilton celebrates his extraordinary work ethic and the power of words to shape a nation. The real Hamilton's life was more complicated — he was a slave owner's son-in-law who made political compromises on slavery, among other failings. My daughter, who has a strong social conscience, wants it noted that her inspiration is the character on stage, not the full historical record. Fair enough.

# Chapter 1

# Cracks Appear

How it starts. How it spreads. Why it matters.

Greymouth, Northern England. Now.



*Rain lashes a boarded-up high street in Greymouth.*



Alex's walk home takes twelve minutes. This is where we meet her first.

Seen the news?

It's just economics, Dad.

They promised levelling up. Got sod all.

Nah, love. It's them forgetting us.

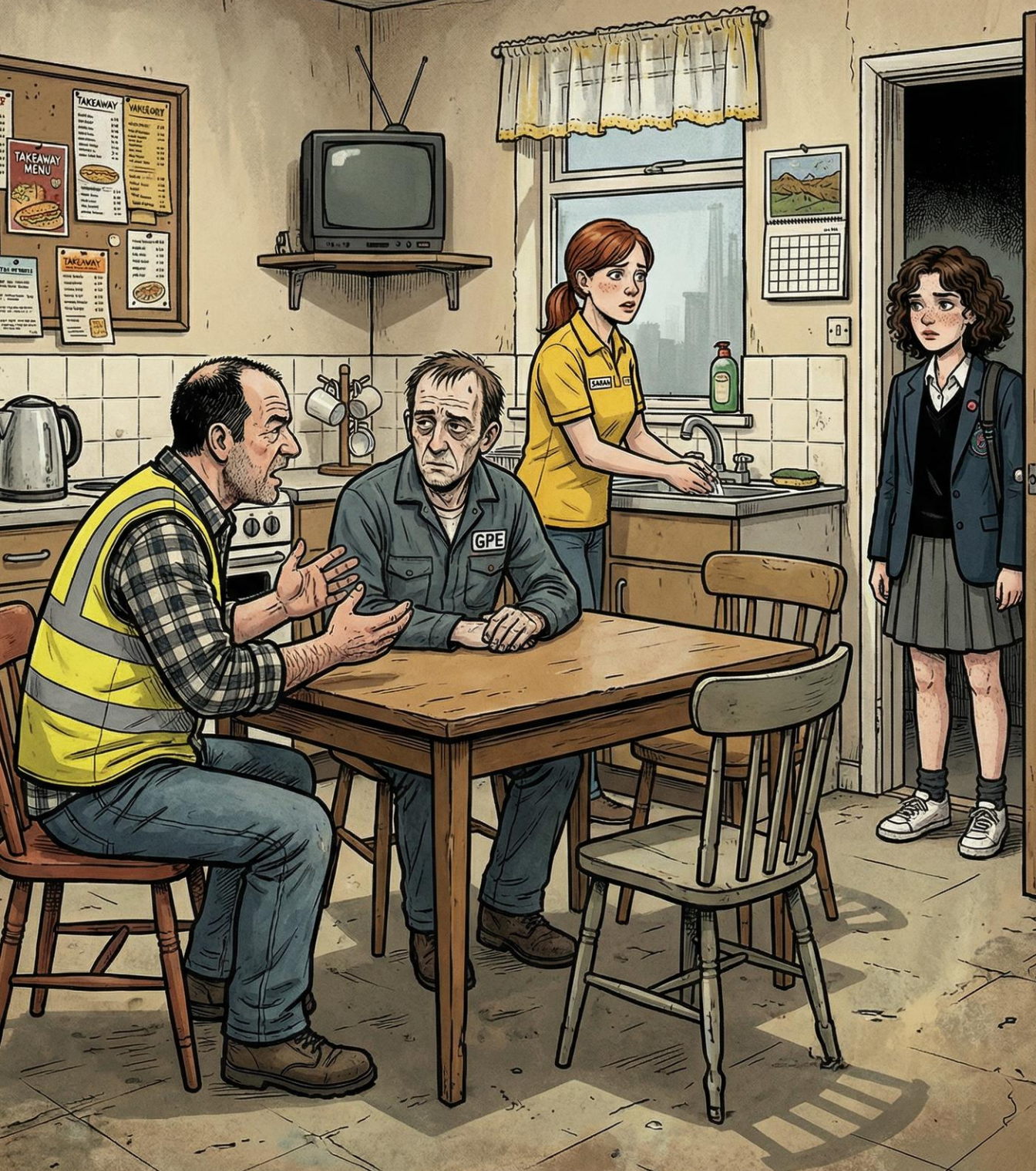


*I don't know who's right. I just know the beans are cold.*

And what'd you get? A letter and a handshake.

Twenty years I gave that place. Twenty years.

It's not just us. Whole country's been sold off.



Watch this. Finally someone talking sense.

Gary, that's enough.

We voted to take back control!



**TAKEAWAY MENU**

Crisp Wrap	£ 3.0
Chicken Lunch	£ 4.0
Delishious Pizza	£ 5.0
Saladish Wrap	£ 3.0
Chickensauce Pizza	£ 5.0

**DORKS**

Baro Pasta	£ 0.5
Sauce & chips	£ 0.9

*Take & pay drive drive*

**VALU**

Pastry	£ 0.4
Pasta	£ 0.4
Chicken	£ 0.5
Meaty	£ 0.8

*WELCOME TO THE VALU*

**SCHOOL T**

	MON	TUE	W
MON			
TUES		Breakfast	8:00
WED			8:00
THUR		Breakfast	8:00
FRI			8:00

Alex alone in her bedroom.



Control from who?

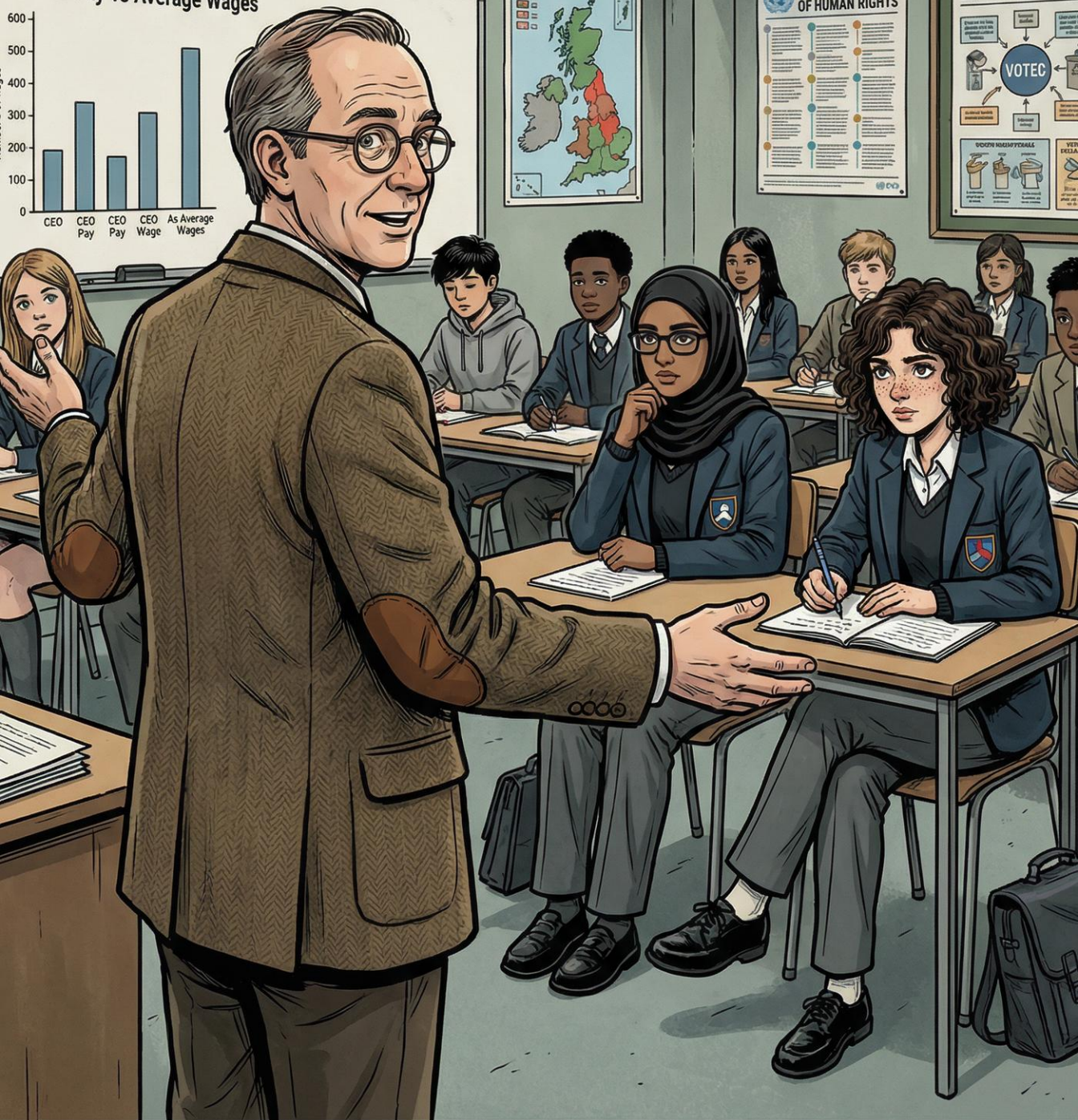
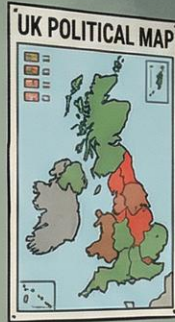
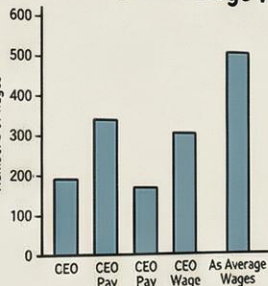
The next day in Mr Henderson's Citizenship Studies class. Alex sits next to her best friend Zara — sharp, hijab, glasses, always three questions ahead.

My dad reckons the whole system's rigged.

Right. Since 2008, FTSE 100 CEO pay rose 80%. Average wages? Flat. Anyone spot a problem?

My dad reckons people blame the system when they can't face the complexity.

CEO Pay vs Average Wages



CEO PAY vs AVERAGE WAGES



CITIZENSHIP STUDIES  
KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

CITIZENSHIP STUDIES

SOCIAL JUSTICE

DISADVANTAGE

CEO PAY vs AVERAGE WAGES



- 2008 CRASH
- AUSTERITY CUTS
- CHILD POVERTY RISING !!!

ZARA

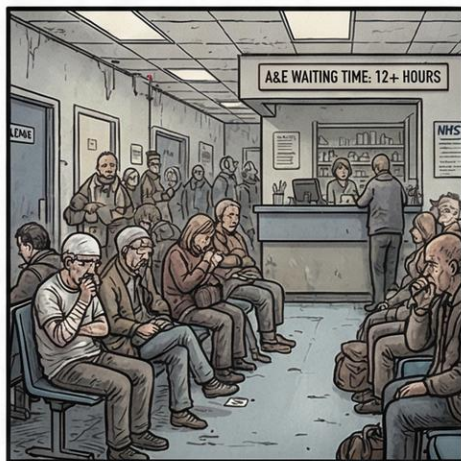
*That night Alex can't sleep. The numbers from class keep turning over in her head and she picks up her phone.*

Just one more article...

They're saying what Dad says. But louder. Angrier. Is this what he means?



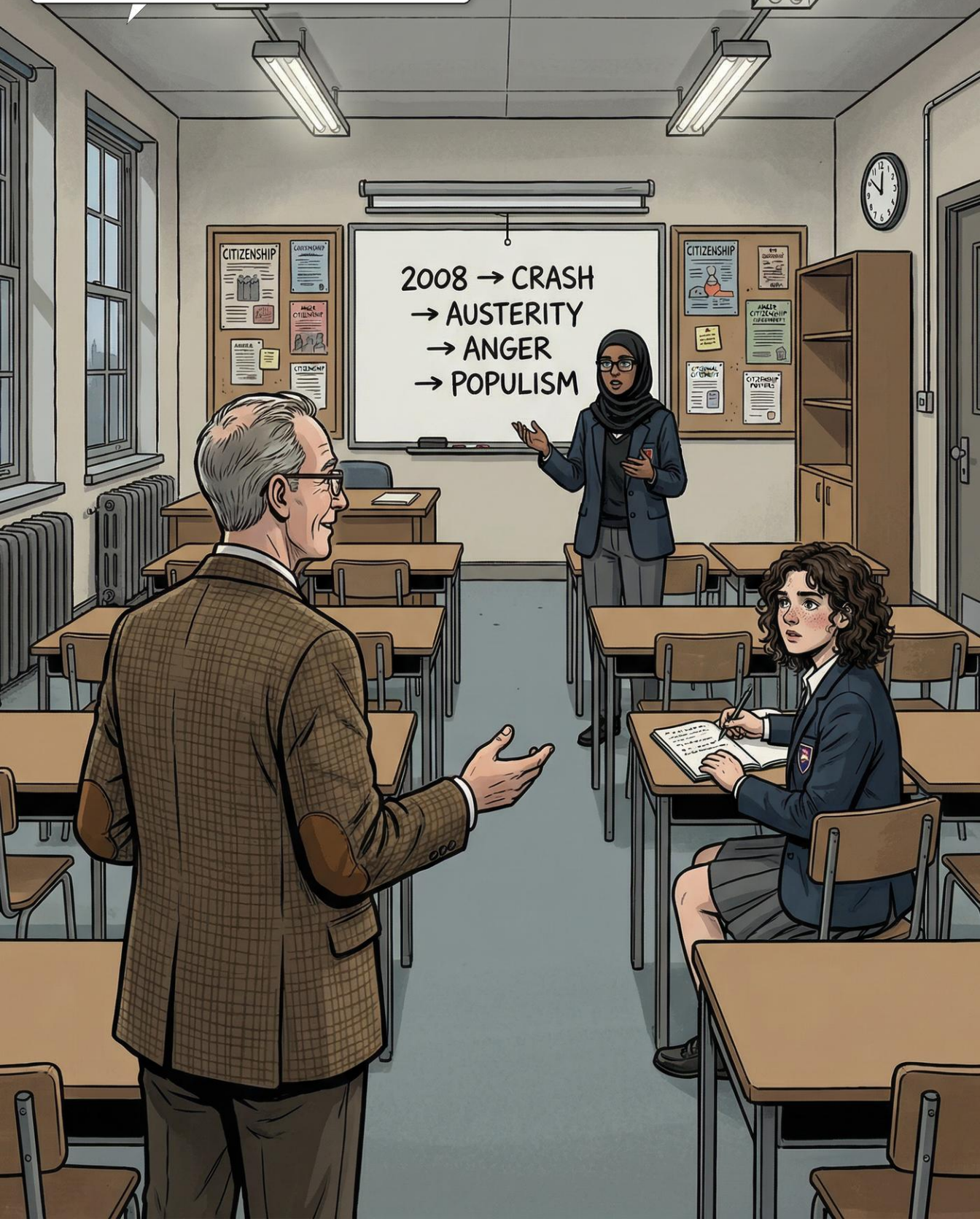
Cracks don't just happen. They widen when no one mends them.



**KEY LEARNING: What Is Populism?**

Exactly. When people feel abandoned by institutions, they look for someone who says "I hear you." That's not evil. It's human.

So populism isn't just about bad people? It's about... systems failing?



Same walk. Different eyes. Every empty shop is a question someone should have answered.

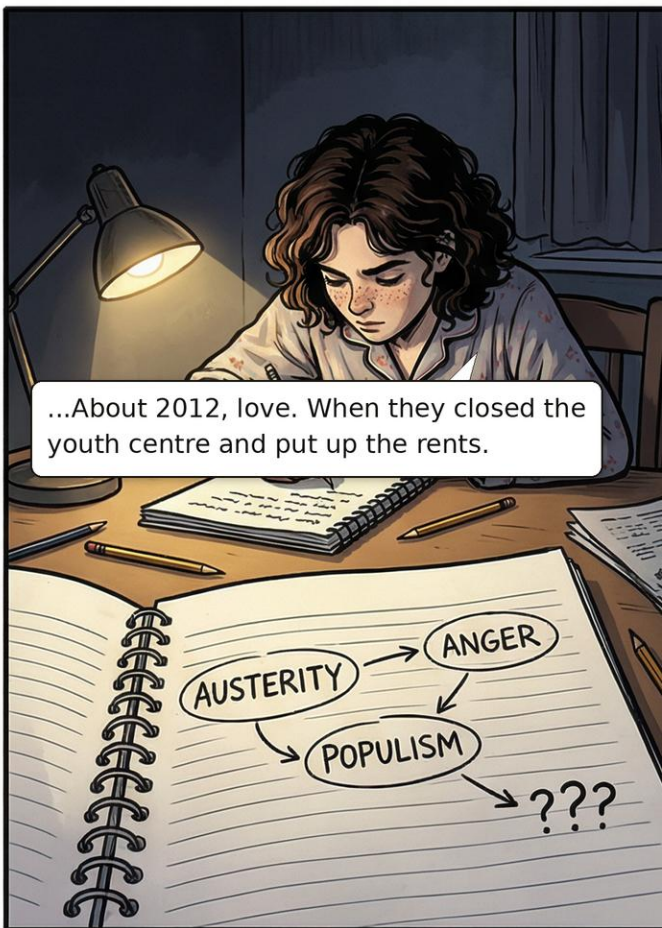
This has been happening for decades. Why didn't anyone fix it?



Dad, when did you first feel like things weren't getting better?



...About 2012, love. When they closed the youth centre and put up the rents.



*This is the bit the politicians never see. The bit that's real.*

Just promise me you'll think for yourself, love. Don't let anyone — any side — do your thinking for you.

I promise.

I'm not a racist, Alex. I just want what we had. Jobs you could raise a family on. A high street that wasn't all vapes and charity shops.

Your grandad worked that shipyard forty years. They shut it and said "retrain." Retrain as what? He was fifty-three.



The wall's been here longer than me. Each poster is a layer of anger. You can read it like tree rings.

It's like the wall is screaming and nobody's listening.



The next day at lunch.

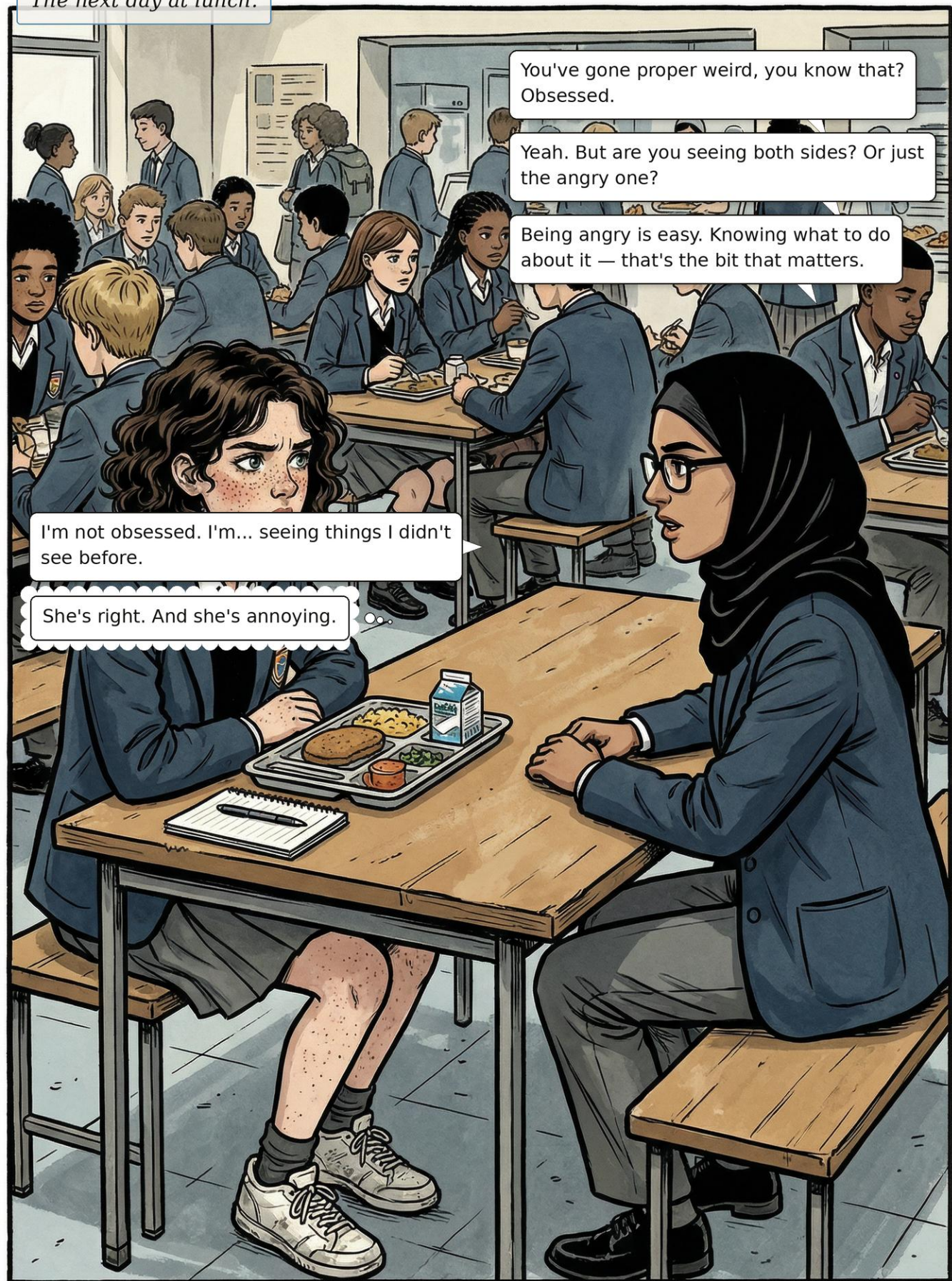
You've gone proper weird, you know that? Obsessed.

Yeah. But are you seeing both sides? Or just the angry one?

Being angry is easy. Knowing what to do about it — that's the bit that matters.

I'm not obsessed. I'm... seeing things I didn't see before.

She's right. And she's annoying.



Alex thinks about her Citizenship assignment. How did we get from hope to hate?

2016



HOPE



ARGUMENT



RAGE



HATRED

Alex spends hours in the library. She's scribbling down notes as though she is running out of time.



Alex sees the pillars of democracy crumbling.

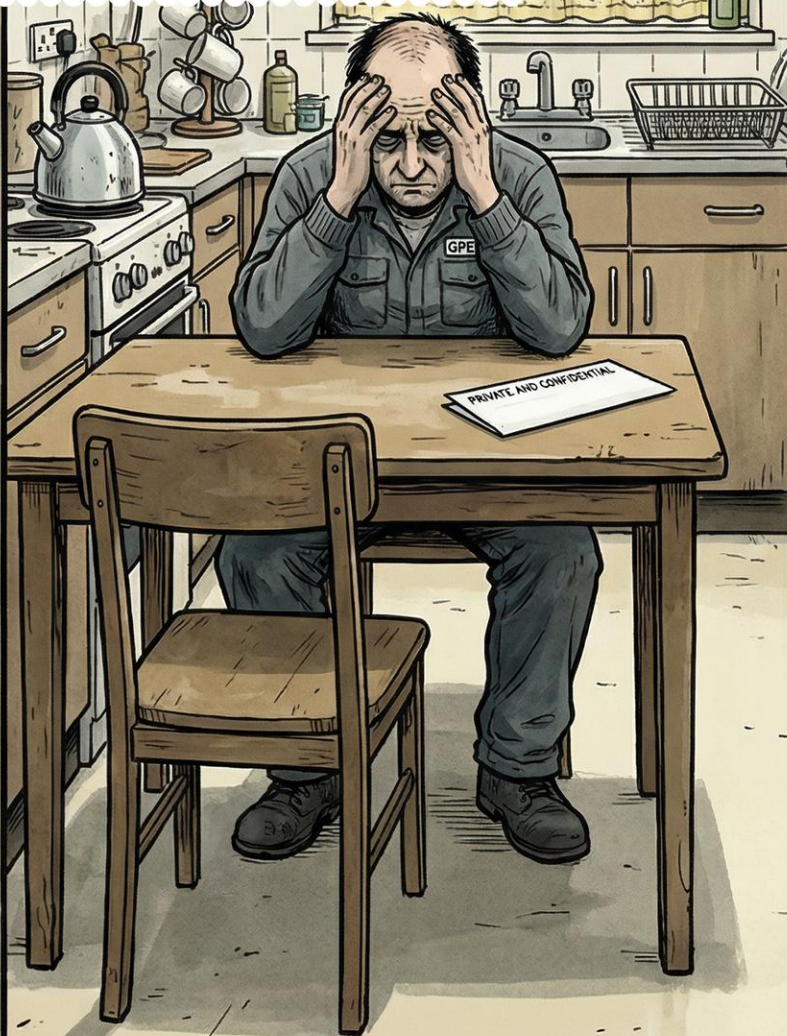


That evening.

Dad?

They didn't even call us in. Just a letter.

Not now, love. Just... not now.



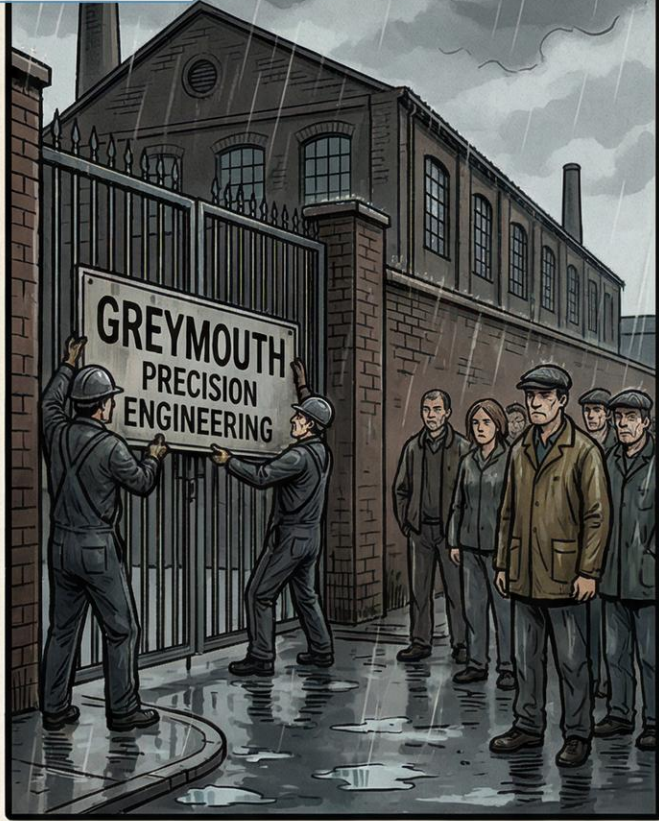
**TAKEAWAY MENU**

SALAD	£3.50
PIZZA	£4.50
CHICKEN	£3.50
TALARI	£2.50
MILKSHAKE	£1.50
ICE CREAM	£1.50

**TIMETABLE**

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI

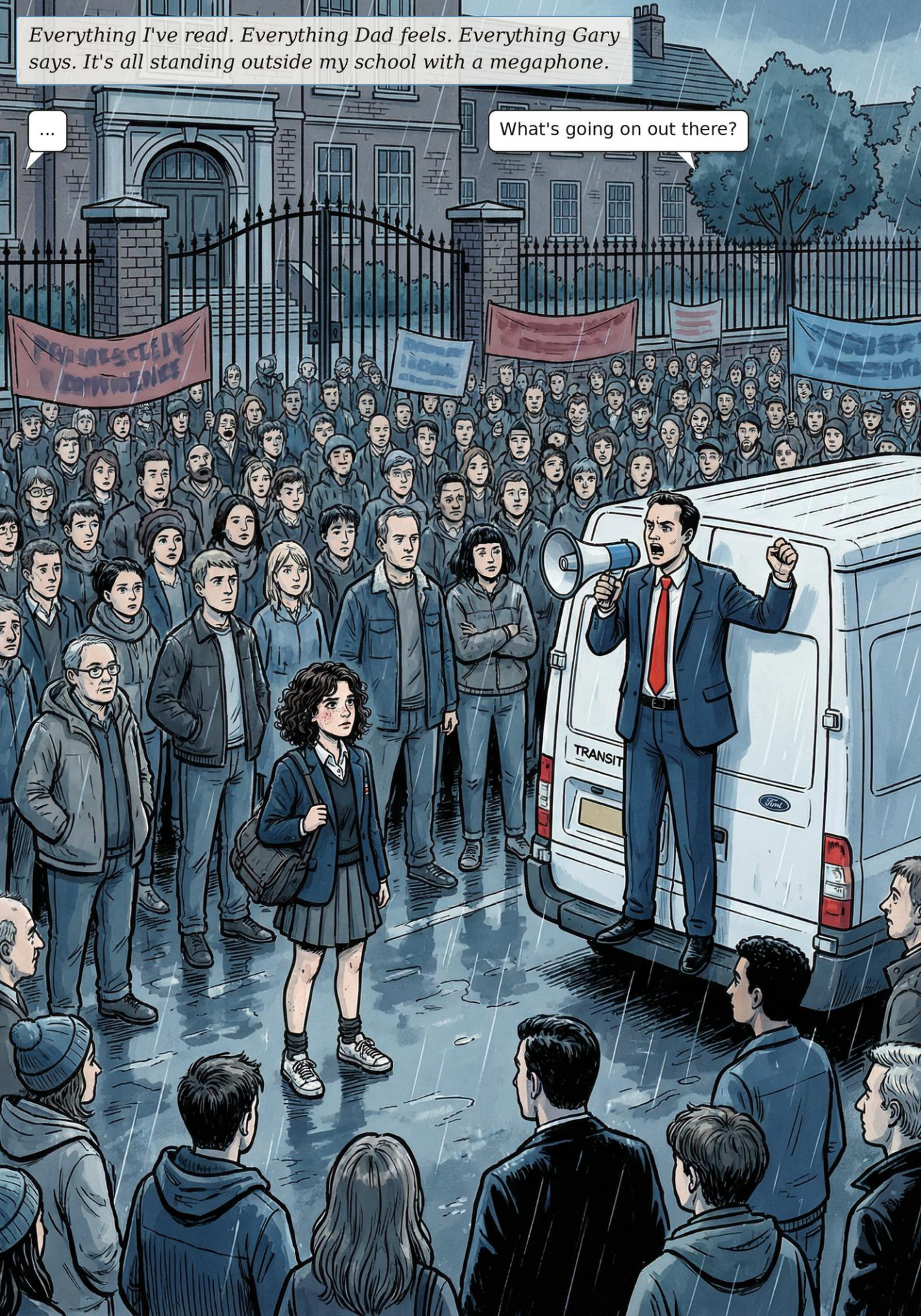
Same route. But now every closed shop, every food bank queue, every angry poster makes sense.



Everything I've read. Everything Dad feels. Everything Gary says. It's all standing outside my school with a megaphone.

...

What's going on out there?



*Rain on my cheeks. Or tears. I'm not sure any more. But I know I need to find out.*



## Chapter 2

# The Promise

---

Why do people follow? And what happens when the promise breaks?

A week later. Alex skips revision to see what Dad meant by 'the people.'

No more Westminster elites!



Alex weaves through the crowd — a sea of different angers.

Globalists shipped your jobs to China!  
Immigrants leapfrog housing queues!

Heard it before. Check the bus claims.

You should see this.

He's got a point...



*Under the lights, even the shadows feel meaningful.*

Someone finally understands.

She sounds like Mum.



Alex is making notes.

Your wages haven't risen since 2008! FACT!

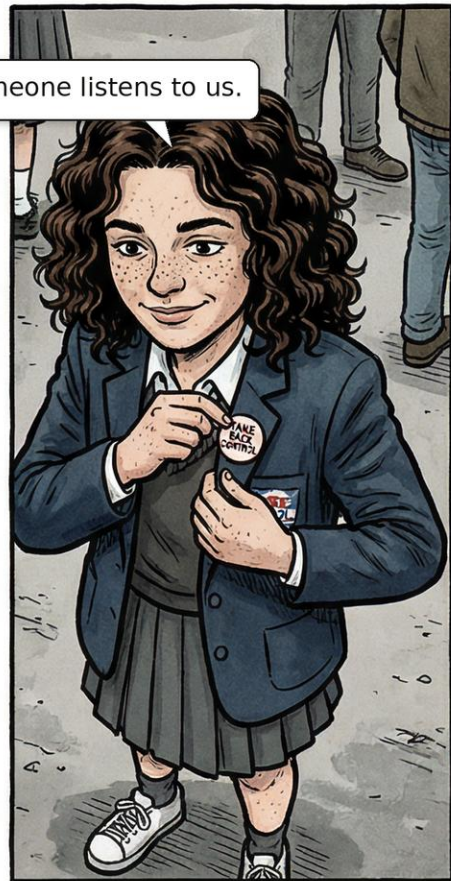
Real pain... but... is it—



*It fits. That's the problem with fitting in — it feels right.*

My girl's school — 30 kids, 15 languages. She can't get the help she needs.

Finally, someone listens to us.

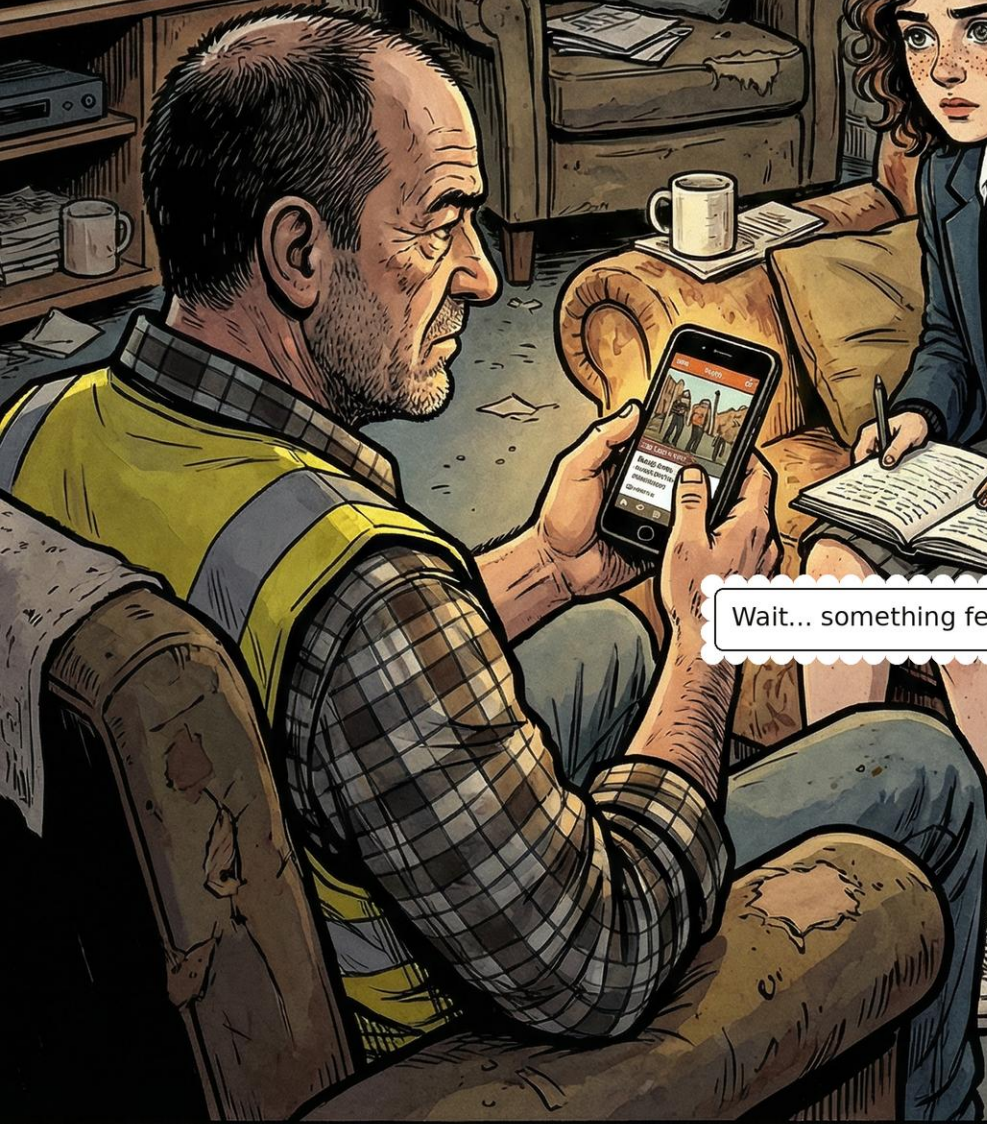


Alex ignores it. The energy is too good to question right now.

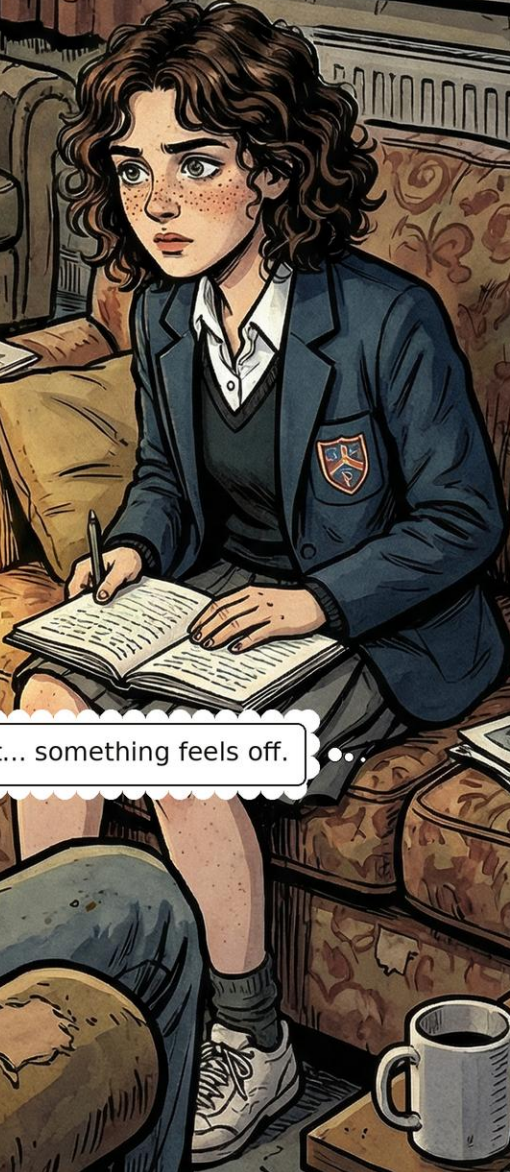
See? This is what I meant!

Heard it before. Check the bus claims.

They call us racists for wanting our country back!



Wait... something feels off. ...



*She goes to see Uncle Gary.*

I've watched them take it all. This isn't about hate, Alex. It's about being forgotten.

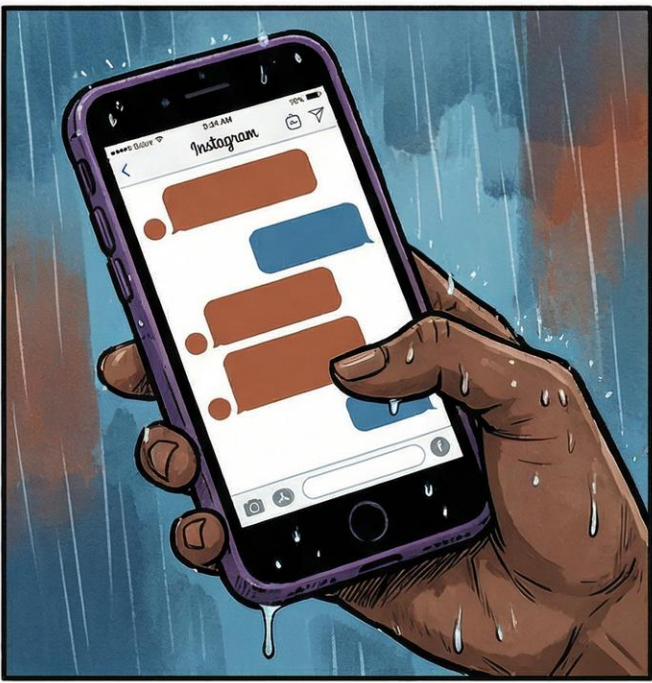
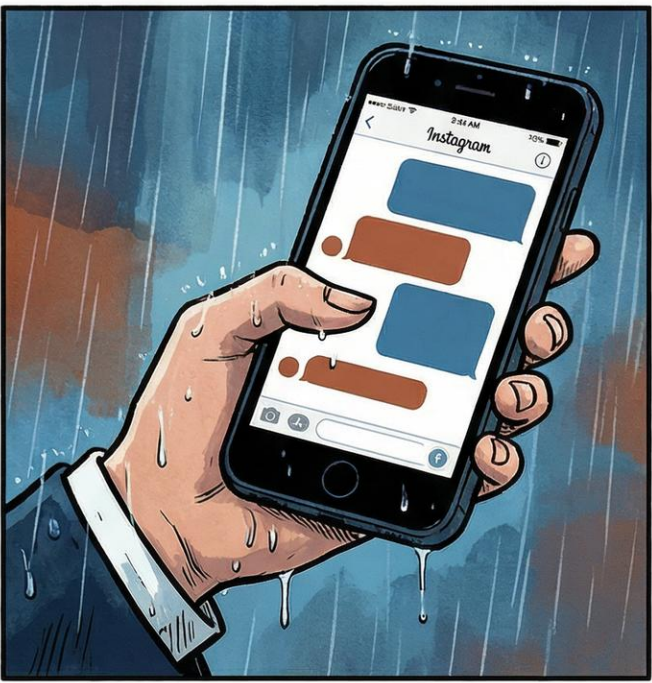
But those statistics the speaker mentioned — where do those actually come from?



Same streets. But her head is somewhere else entirely.

He genuinely believes it Zara. It's not hate. It's hurt.

That's what makes it dangerous. Come over tomorrow. I want to show you something.




*That night her phone and notebook are both open. She's trying to figure out what she actually thinks.*



He's not wrong about everything. But he's blaming the wrong people.

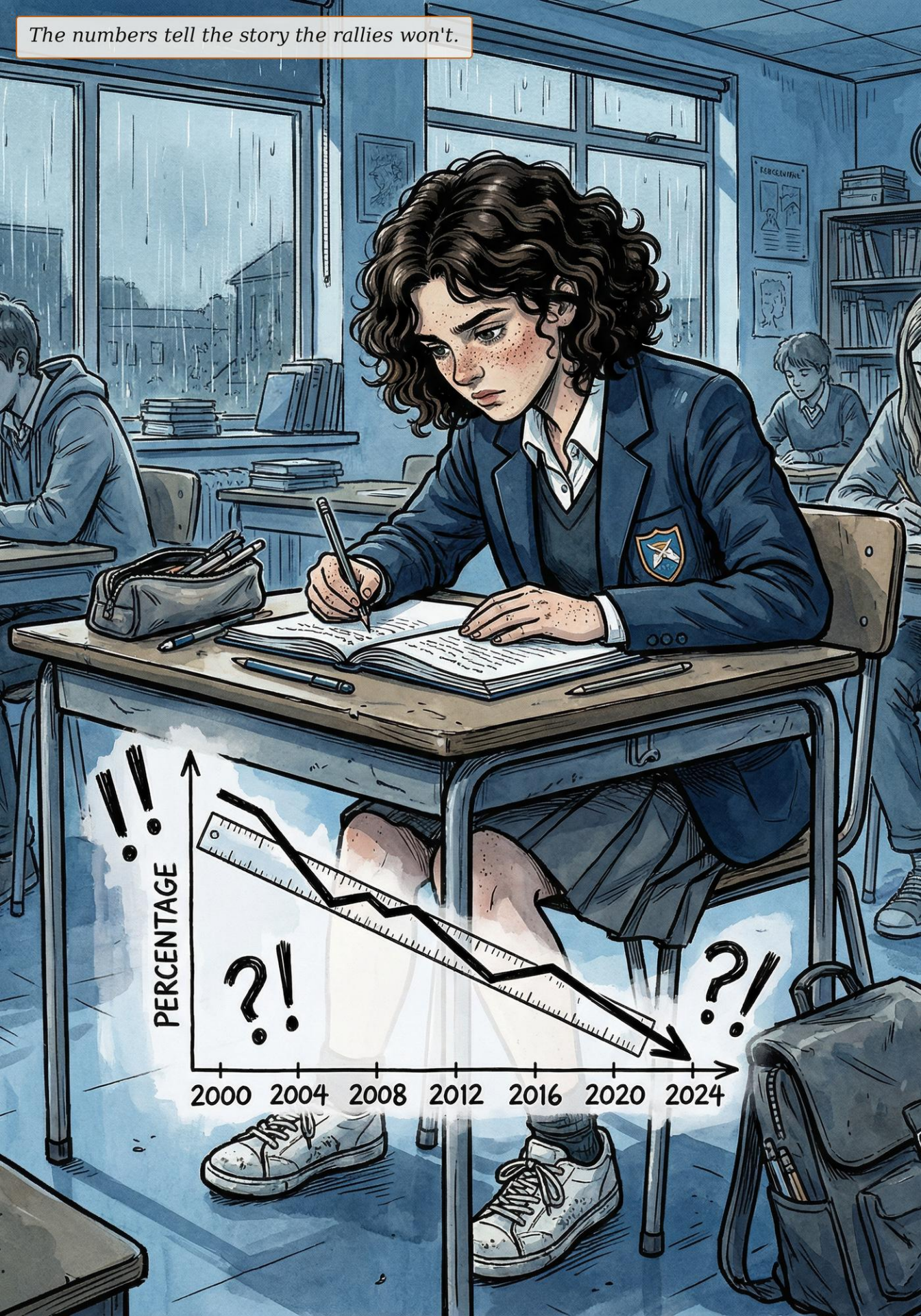
*She's been pulled in two directions in one night.*

A woman with curly brown hair and freckles, wearing a striped pajama top, stands in a bathroom. She is looking at her reflection in a mirror above a sink. The mirror shows her wearing a campaign button that says "RALLY". The bathroom has a tiled wall, a sink with a faucet, a toothbrush holder with two toothbrushes, a bar of soap, and a bottle of shampoo. A light bulb hangs above the mirror. A window with a shelf holding bottles is visible on the left.

I felt something real in that crowd. But what was it — connection or manipulation?



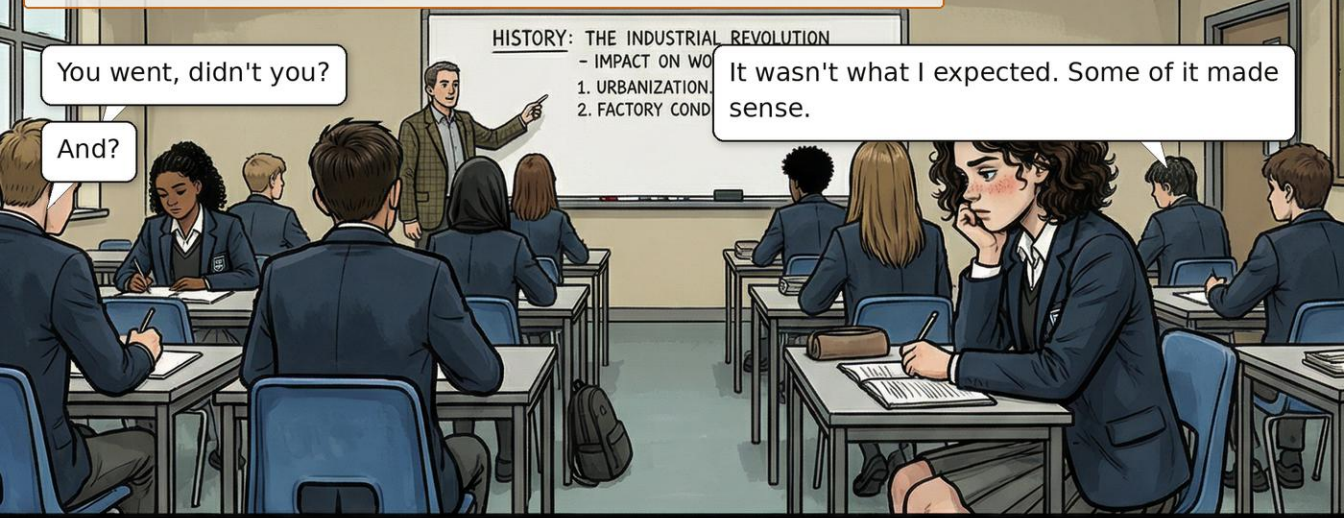
The numbers tell the story the rallies won't.



PERCENTAGE

2000 2004 2008 2012 2016 2020 2024

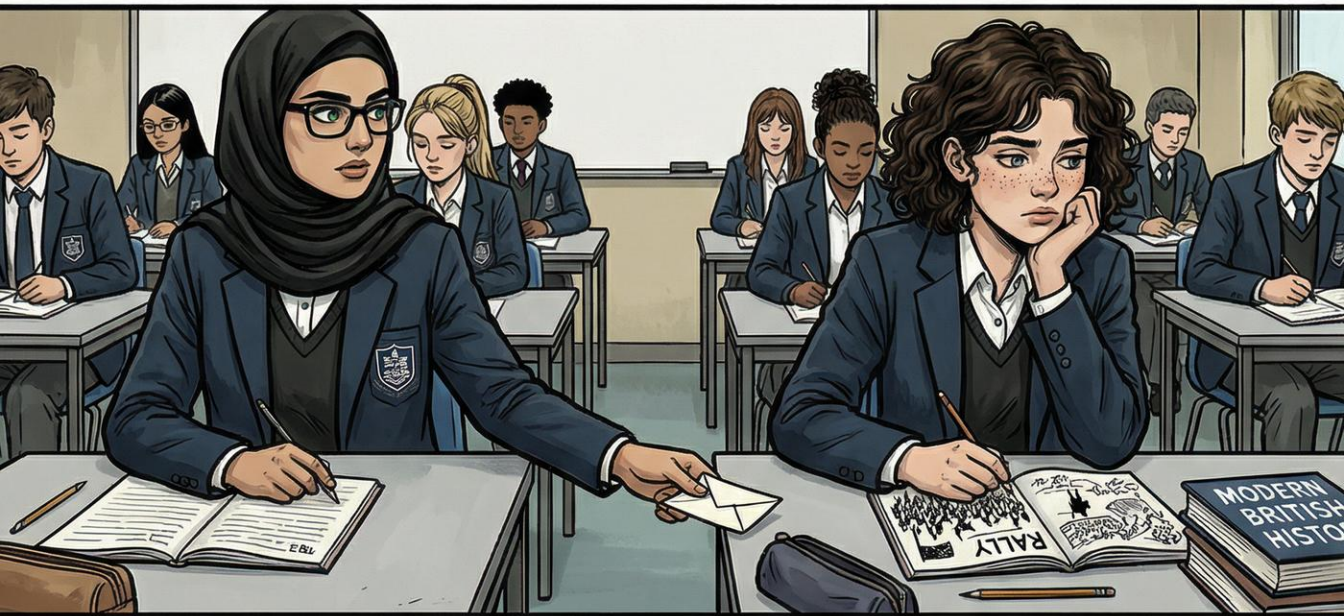
School. Same desks. Same board. But Alex is somewhere else entirely.



You went, didn't you?

And?

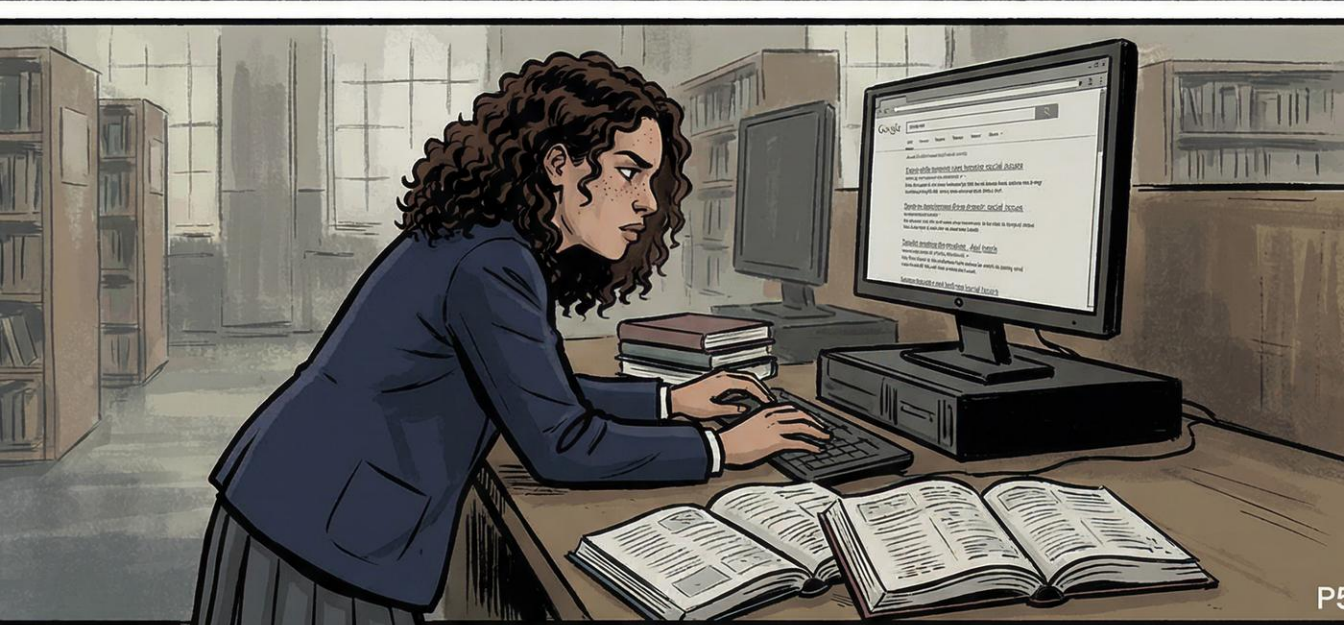
It wasn't what I expected. Some of it made sense.



RALLY ON SATURDAY.  
YOU IN?  
-Z.

The most effective lies are built on true foundations.

That's the point. It's supposed to make sense. That's what makes it dangerous.



Dad finally asked the question nobody had dared to ask.

Gary. Be honest with me. Do the actual numbers back any of that up?

The numbers? It's not about numbers, it's about what you see with your own eyes.



Upstairs, Alex draws her diagram. She needs to understand what she saw.

It's not the anger that hooks people. It's the feeling that someone finally sees them.



*The algorithm never sleeps. She does.*



## Chapter 3

# Why It Sticks

Algorithms, echo chambers, and the long game.

*The next few days Alex teaches herself more about how social media works...*



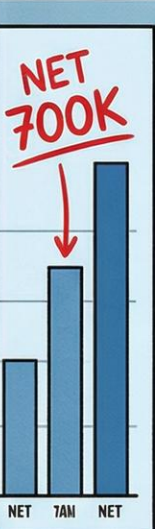
Real pain, manufactured fear. Alex couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

MUTTERING...

Real pain, though. Dad's wage stuck since '08.

Globalization screwed us. Read this!

3:41



**TABLOID**

**MILLIONS POURING IN £500M**

Loan must reach **100,000**

**MINER GAN**

© 2018 News Corp. All rights reserved. This content may not be reproduced without the express written permission of News Corp. News Corp. is not responsible for the content of any external links. News Corp. is not responsible for the content of any external links. News Corp. is not responsible for the content of any external links.



You look terrible.

This is actually well-argued.

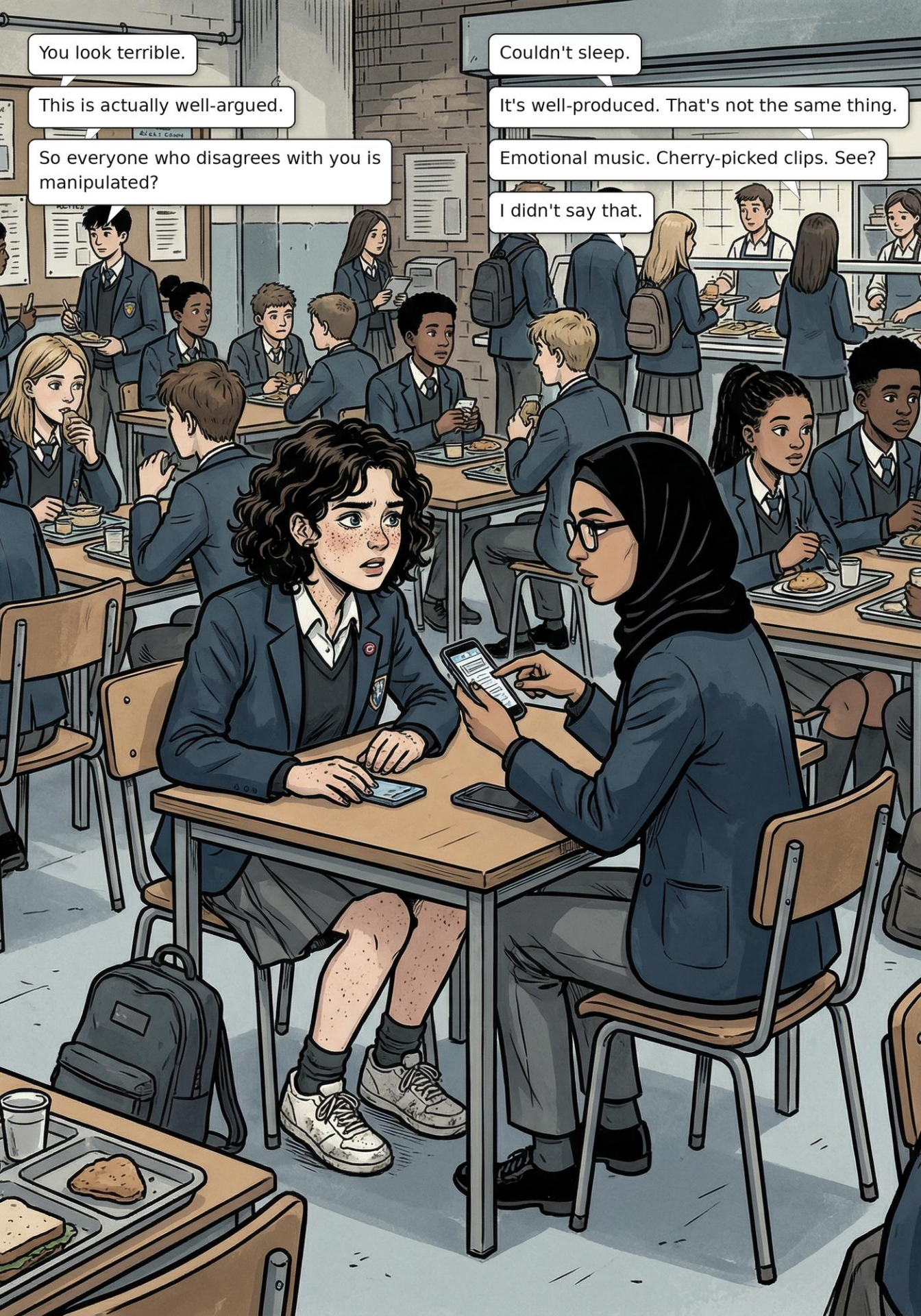
So everyone who disagrees with you is manipulated?

Couldn't sleep.

It's well-produced. That's not the same thing.

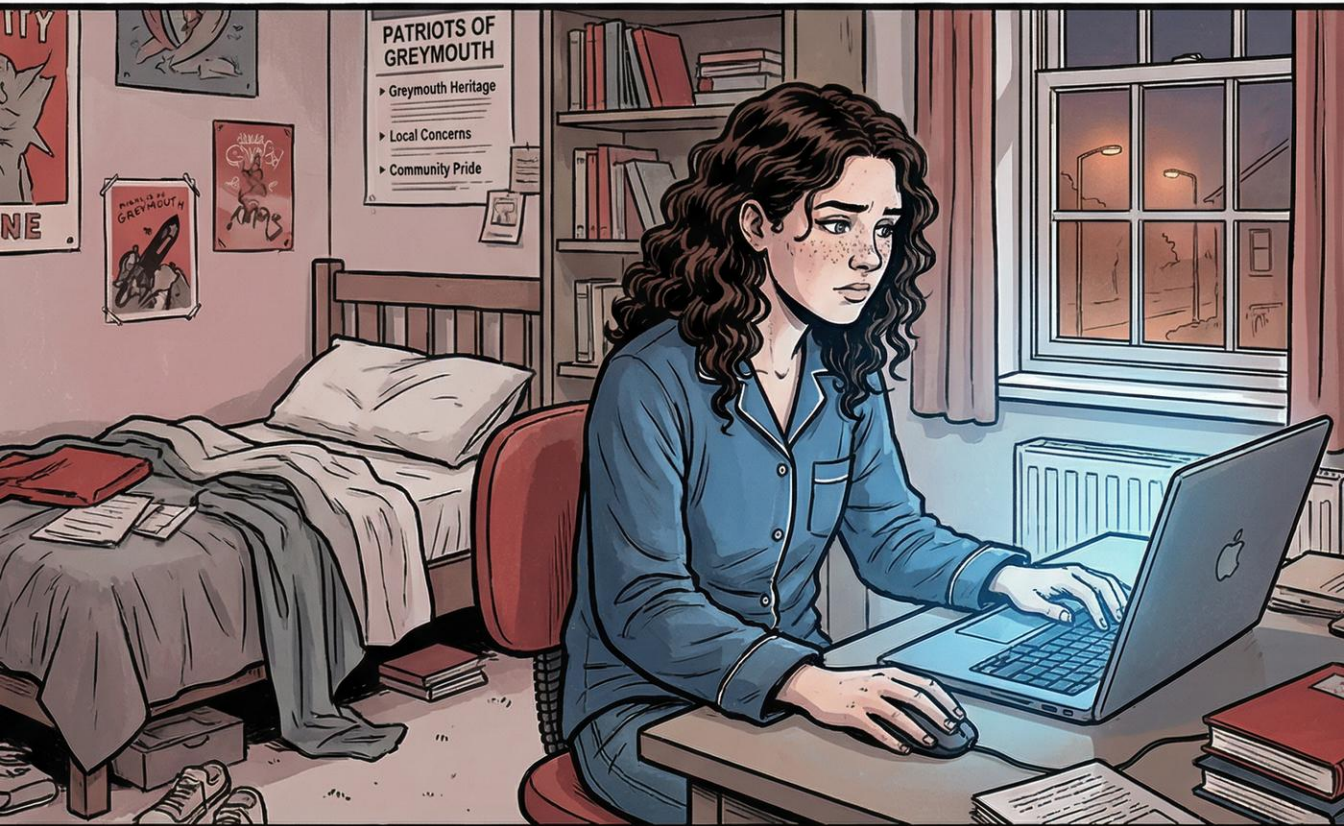
Emotional music. Cherry-picked clips. See?

I didn't say that.



*The line between angry and extreme isn't a line. It's a gradient.  
And she couldn't see where she was on it.*

Glad someone else gets it. Teachers are all  
Remain robots.



*Not stupid. Not evil. Just certain.*

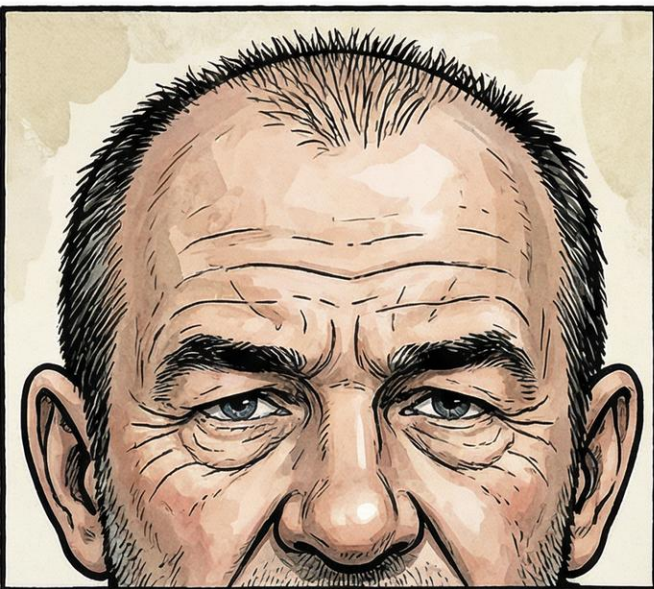
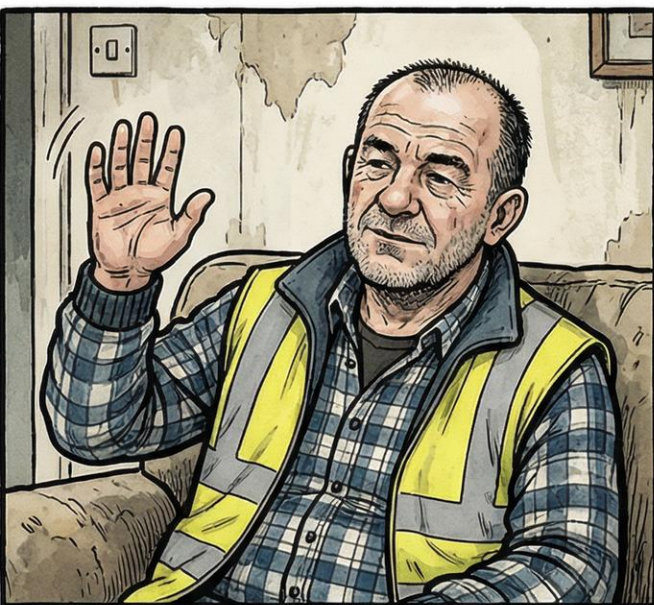
Mate sent me this. Really makes you think.

Same story everywhere, innit? The point stands.

Because I can see it with my own eyes! Don't need some fact-checker telling me what I see.

Some of those clips are from different countries, Uncle Gary.

But if the evidence is fake, how can the point stand?



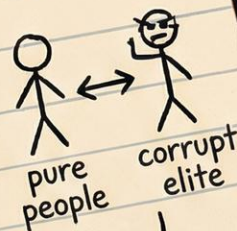
Why do people believe things that aren't true? Alex researches that question until she understands it.

# WHY POPULISM STICKS

Alex Research Notes — Citizenship

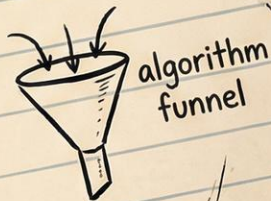
## What Is Populism?

- "Us vs. Them" mentality
- Appeals to "the common people"
- Anti-elite rhetoric
- Charismatic leader figure



## Why It Hooks People

- Simplifies complex issues
- Offers emotional validation
- Creates sense of belonging
- Exploits fear & frustration



## The Problem

Real Pain + Simple Story

- Critical Thinking

= Danger

She maps the five steps. Once you see the pattern, you can't unsee it.

# HOW THE ALGORITHM RADICALISES

5 Steps — Alex Notes



① Hook: you watch one angry video.



② Recommend: →  slightly more extreme each time.




③ Isolate:  echo chamber.



④ Radicalise:  extreme seems normal.



⑤ Amplify:  cycle repeats.

Source note: based on recent studies & personal observations.

Zara had been waiting for her to notice.

It gives ordinary people a voice! Look at the rally — real people, real energy!

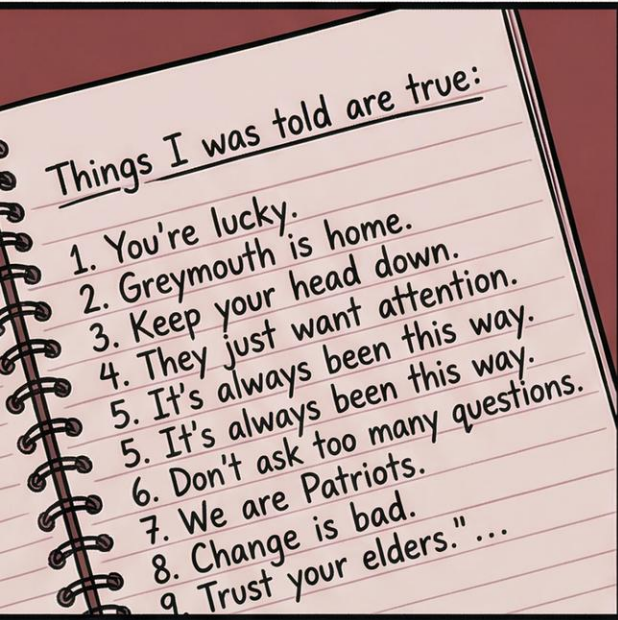
Both right. The question isn't whether social media is good or bad — it's who controls the algorithm and why.

It gives liars a megaphone. And the algorithm doesn't care which is which.

I'm not your enemy, Alex. I'm your fact-checker.



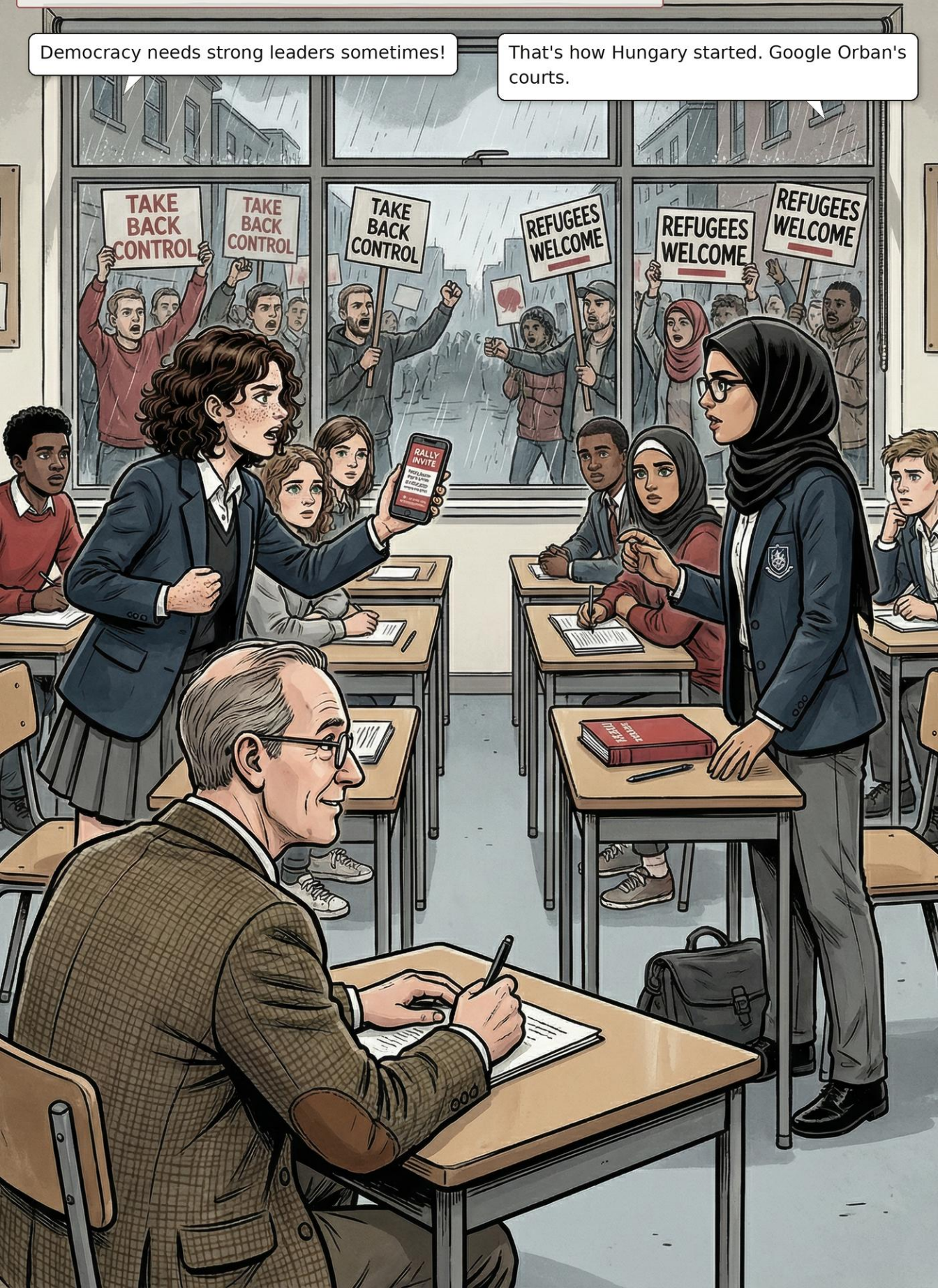
Halfway out of the rabbit hole is the loneliest place.



Sides are forming. And I'm standing in the middle of the road.

Democracy needs strong leaders sometimes!

That's how Hungary started. Google Orban's courts.



## Chapter 4

# Institutions Fall

When the checks stop checking. When the balances tip.



Three spaces where democracy lives or dies.

SCHOOL LIBRARY.



HENDERSON'S CLASSROOM.



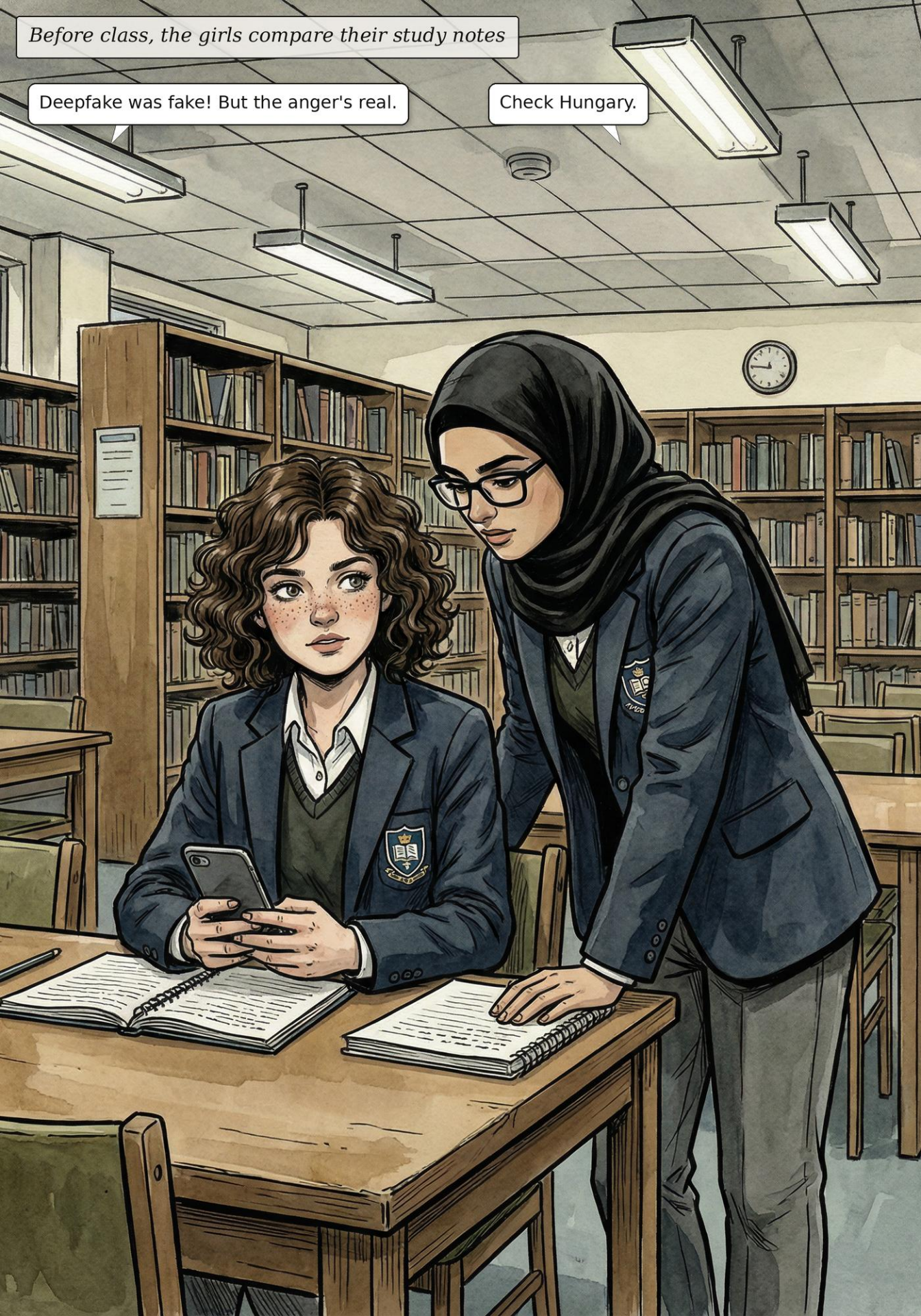
RALLY GROUND.



Before class, the girls compare their study notes

Deepfake was fake! But the anger's real.

Check Hungary.



In Poland, the government fined opposition media. In Brazil, Bolsonaro wiped entire scientific databases — environmental data, gone overnight. The same playbook, different flags.

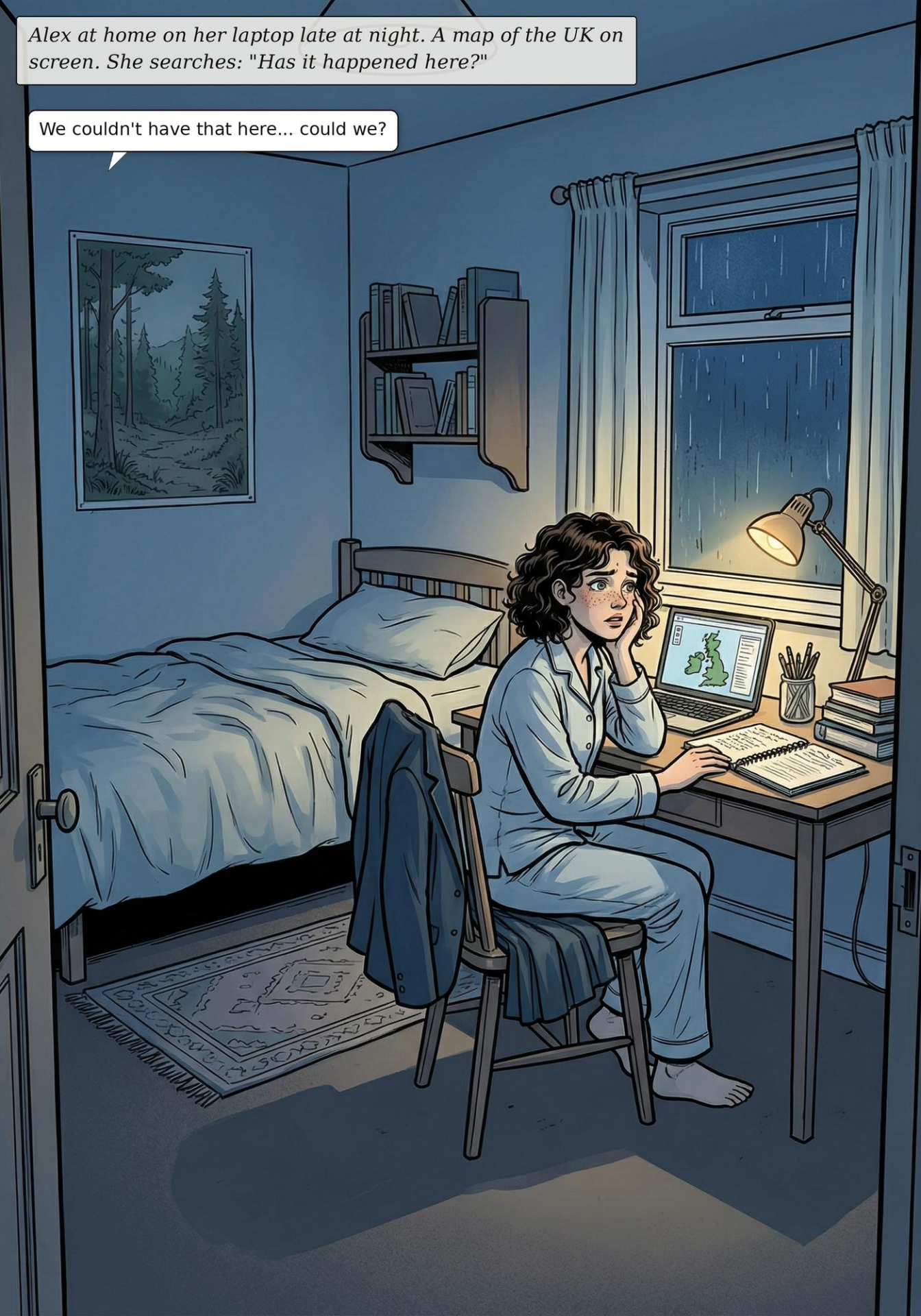


*Step by step. Too slow to notice until it's done.. Gerrymander the districts. Restrict who can vote. Challenge results when you lose. Make it harder for the wrong people to have a say. Democracy starts to look like democracy — but isn't.*



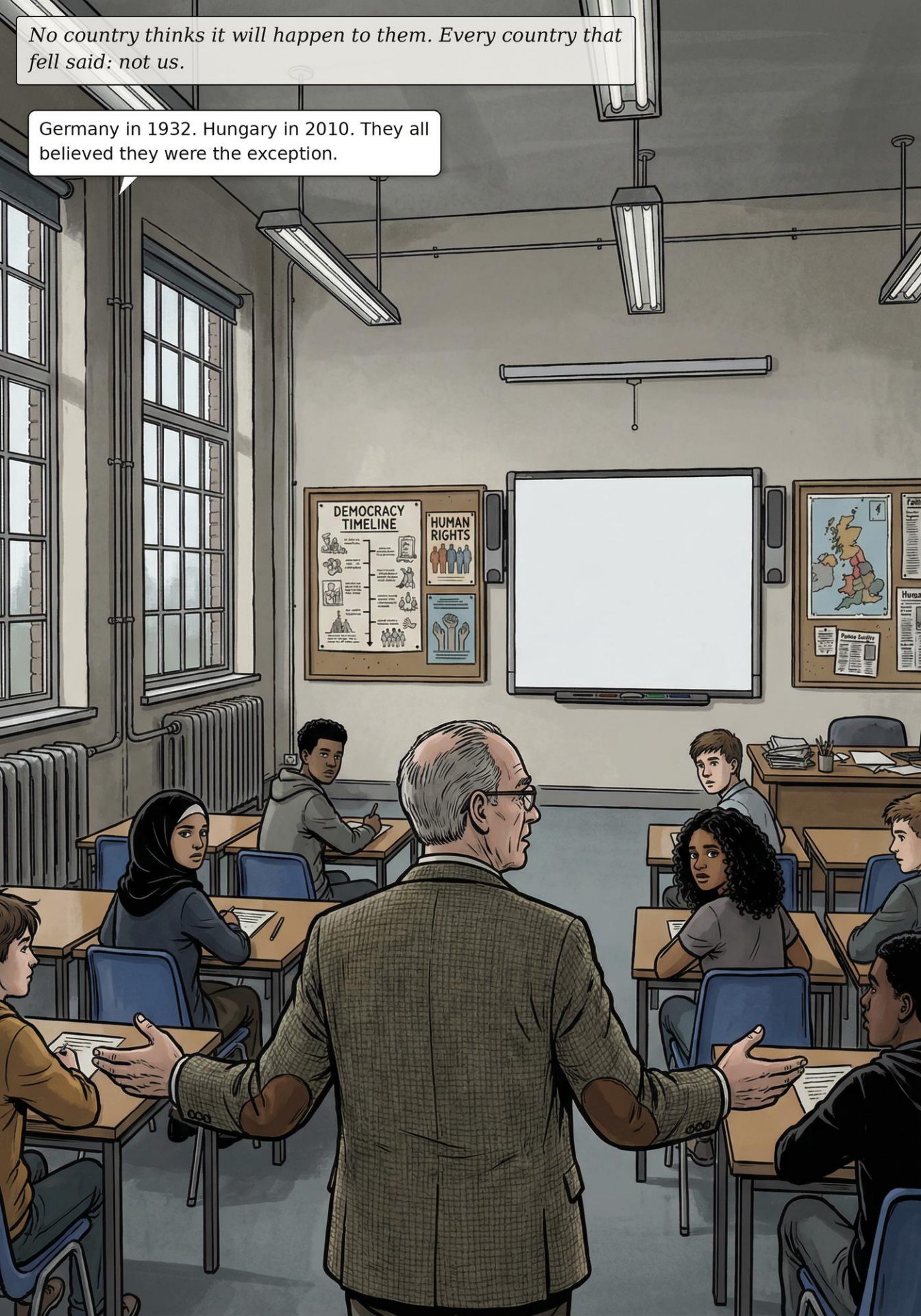
Alex at home on her laptop late at night. A map of the UK on screen. She searches: "Has it happened here?"

We couldn't have that here... could we?

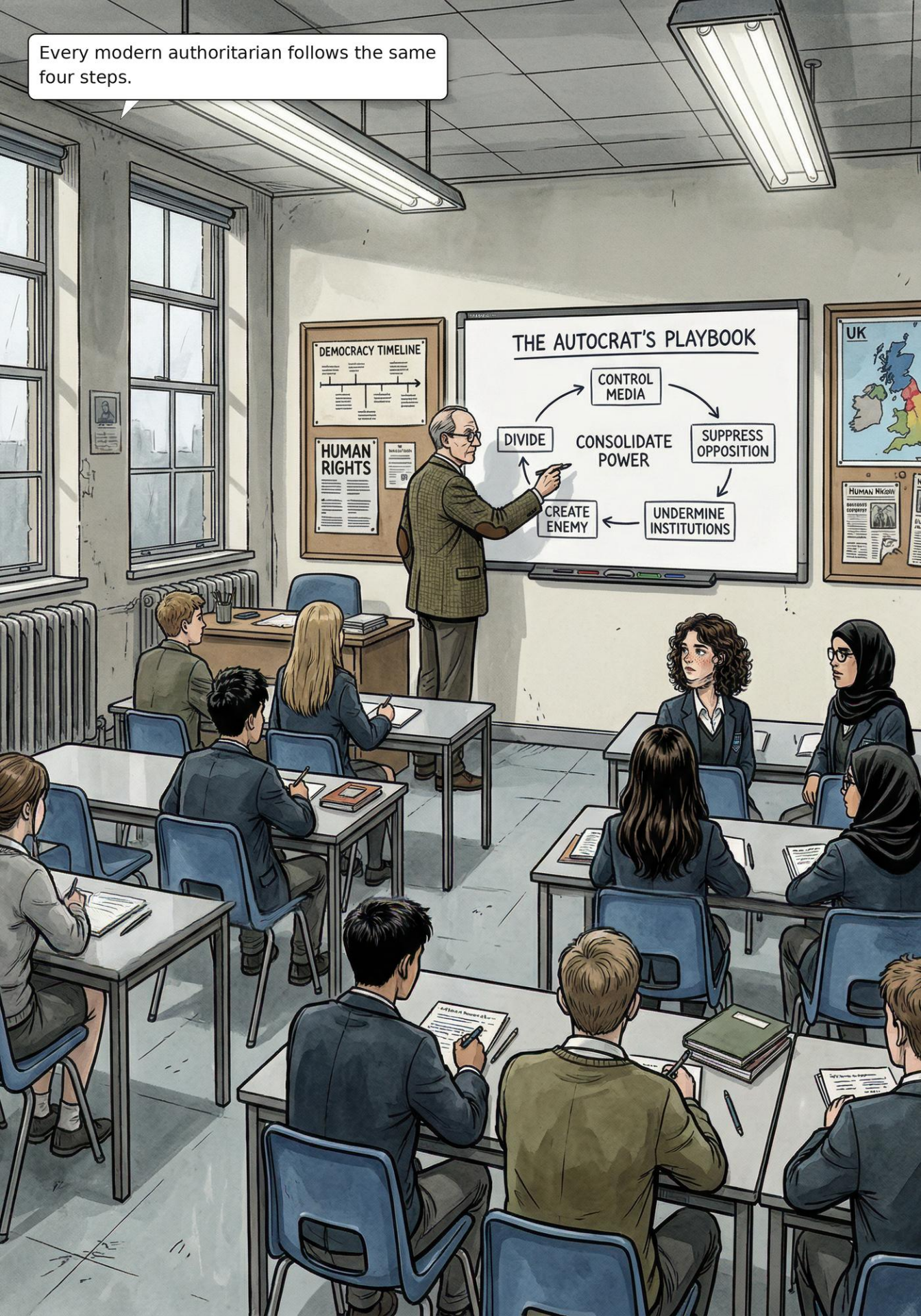


No country thinks it will happen to them. Every country that fell said: not us.

Germany in 1932. Hungary in 2010. They all believed they were the exception.

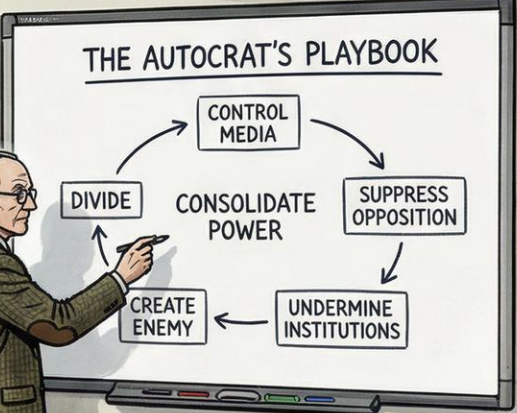


Every modern authoritarian follows the same four steps.



**DEMOCRACY TIMELINE**

**HUMAN RIGHTS**



**UK**

**HUMAN RIGHTS**

*On the way home Alex bumps into Uncle Gary. She stops short. He looks surprised but pleased to see her.*

Coming to the rally? Bigger speakers this time. It's going to be massive.

Who's speaking?

People who tell it straight. No spin. No establishment filter.



Wait. I just read about this. Word for word.  
Step 2 of the playbook.



One side has the energy. The other has the evidence. Why can't one side have both?



## 'THE FOUR PILLARS OF DEMOCRACY'

1. **FREE ELECTIONS** — fair voting, independent electoral commissions, no interference

2. **FREE PRESS** — independent media, not controlled by state or party

3. **RULE OF LAW** — courts independent from government, no one above the law

4. **CIVIL SOCIETY** — charities, NGOs, protest rights, freedom of assembly

↑ ALL FOUR needed — remove one and the whole thing collapses

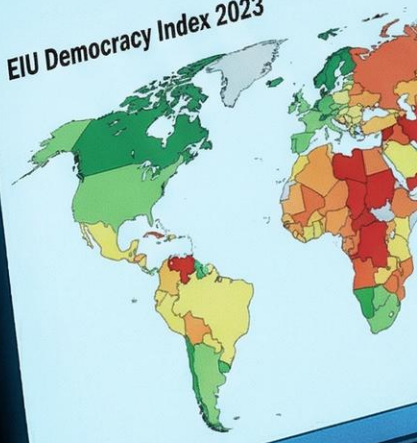
Homework due Thursday — Citizenship





Homework that evening...

EIU Democracy Index 2023

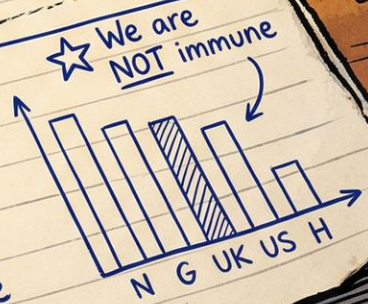


# HOW DEMOCRATIC IS THE UK?

## EIU Democracy Index 2023

Country	Score	Type
Norway	9.81	FULL DEMOCRACY
Germany	8.79	Full Democracy
UK	8.28	Full Democracy (but FALLING)
USA	7.85	Flawed Democracy
Hungary	3.67	HYBRID REGIME

UK risks: press freedom concerns, prorogation 2019, Voter ID law 2023, Rwanda plan challenge

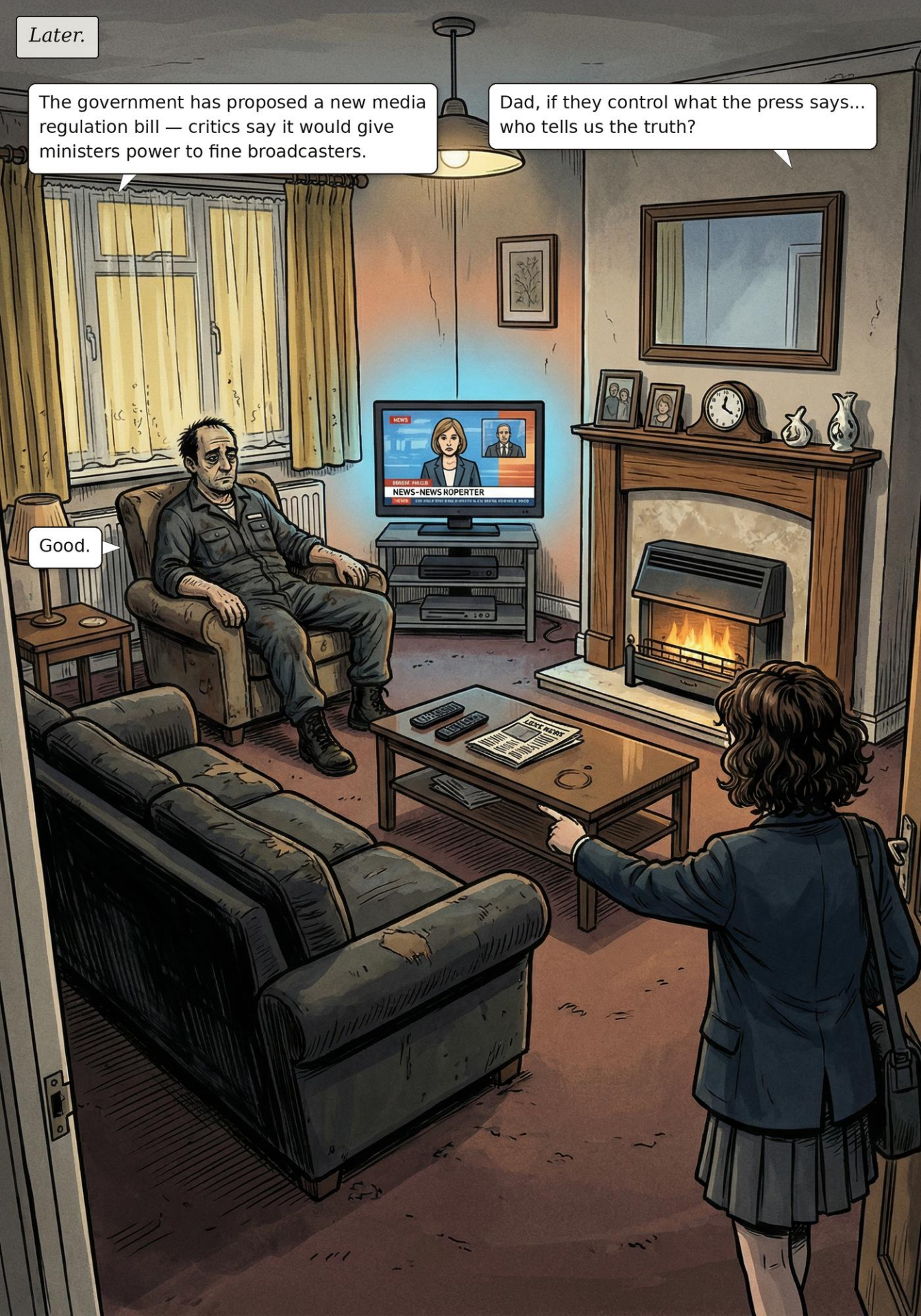


Later.

The government has proposed a new media regulation bill — critics say it would give ministers power to fine broadcasters.

Dad, if they control what the press says... who tells us the truth?

Good.



*She didn't change his mind. She just put a question in it. Sometimes that's enough to start with.*



When you got made redundant and nobody reported on it. When the factory closed and it was page 12. When it happened to us and we were invisible.

When did you get so political?

Alex goes out to meet Zara. Park bench. Both girls sitting. Zara staring ahead.

My parents came from Syria. They didn't read about institutions falling. They lived it.

What happened to your dad?

He was a lawyer in Damascus. Courts stopped being independent in the 90s. By 2011...



So when people chant "take back control" and then attack judges... I've seen where that goes. My dad has the scars.

I'm sorry I called you a Remain robot. I didn't understand what you actually knew.

I wasn't even Remain. I was eight.



Look at this — seventeen thousand likes. He's got a point.

Now look at this. Same claim. Fact-checked. Completely different story.

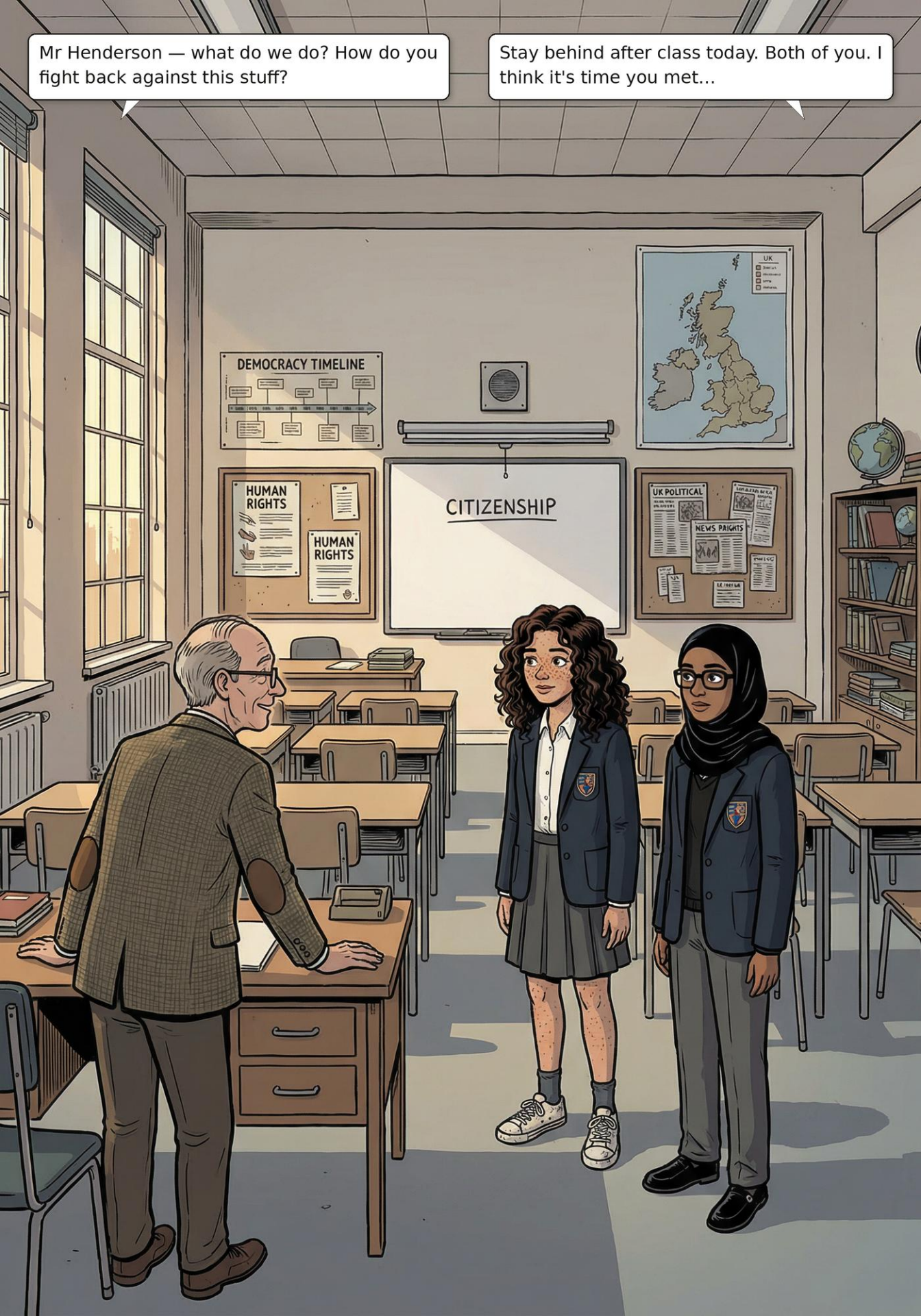
How does the lie get more likes than the truth?

Because anger travels faster than accuracy.



Mr Henderson — what do we do? How do you fight back against this stuff?

Stay behind after class today. Both of you. I think it's time you met...



Mr Henderson introduces them to the new after school debating club.

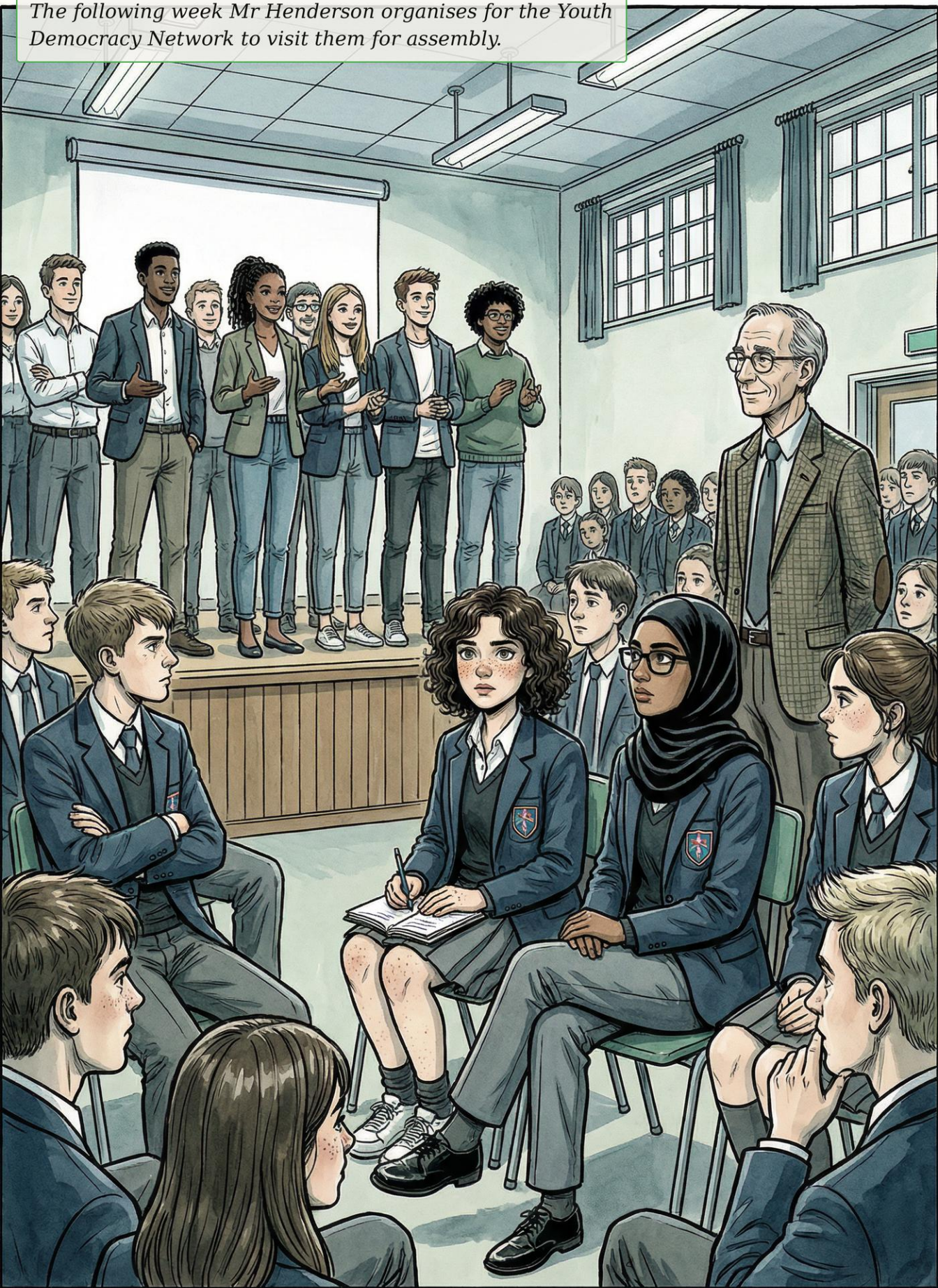


## Chapter 5

# Youth Pushback

She stops watching. She starts acting.

The following week Mr Henderson organises for the Youth Democracy Network to visit them for assembly.



Most of the students are sceptical but Alex and Zara listen with interest.



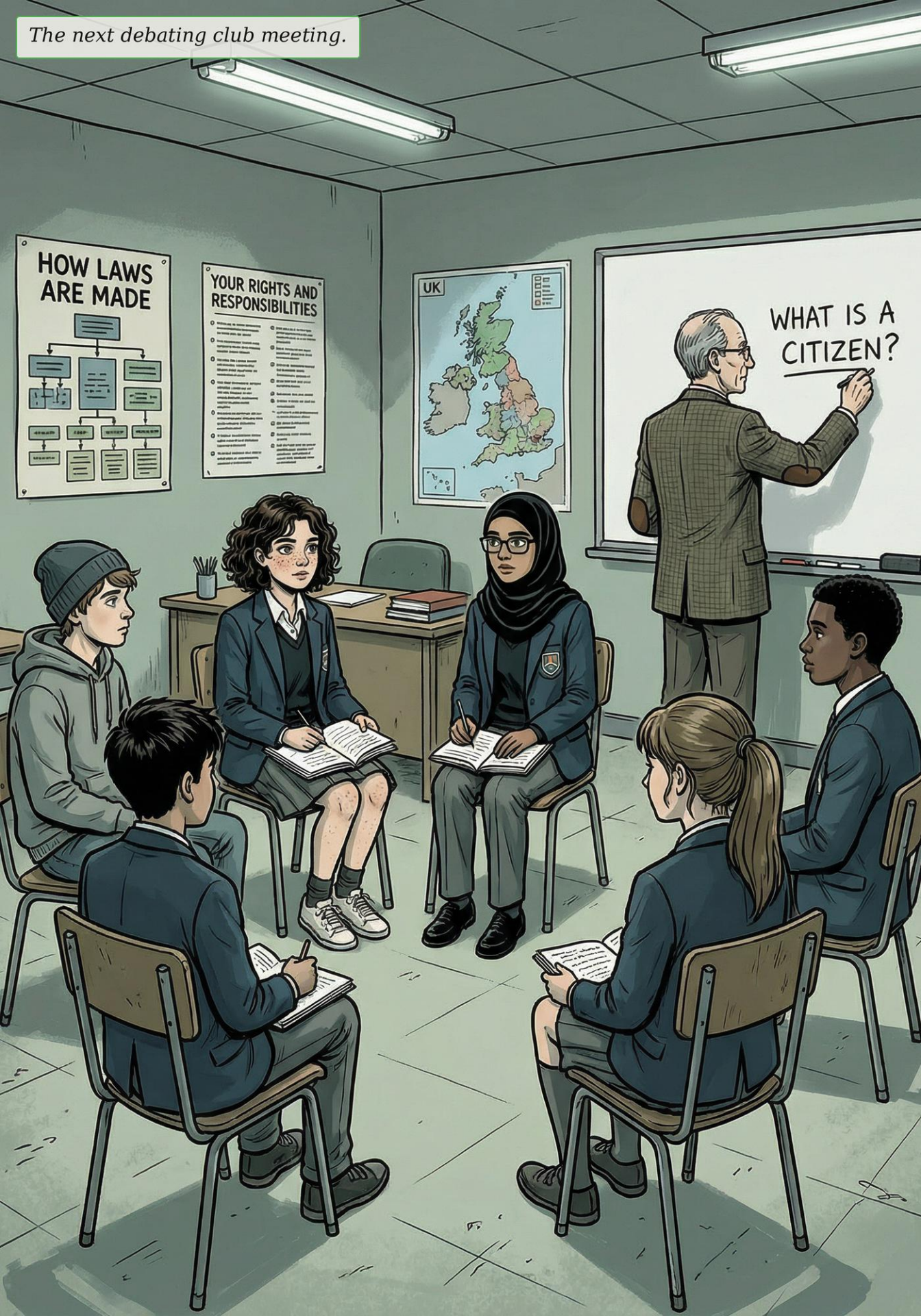
After assembly the girls are full of ideas.

We could do this here. A proper club.

Mr Henderson would back it. He'd have to.



The next debating club meeting.



### HOW LAWS ARE MADE

### YOUR RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES



WHAT IS A  
CITIZEN?

That evening she stayed up late making the plan.

## DEBATE CLUB — THE PLAN

1. Get Henderson approval — DONE! ✓

2. Book the school hall

3. Posters — invite the **WHOLE TOWN**

4. Find a speaker who DISAGREES with me.

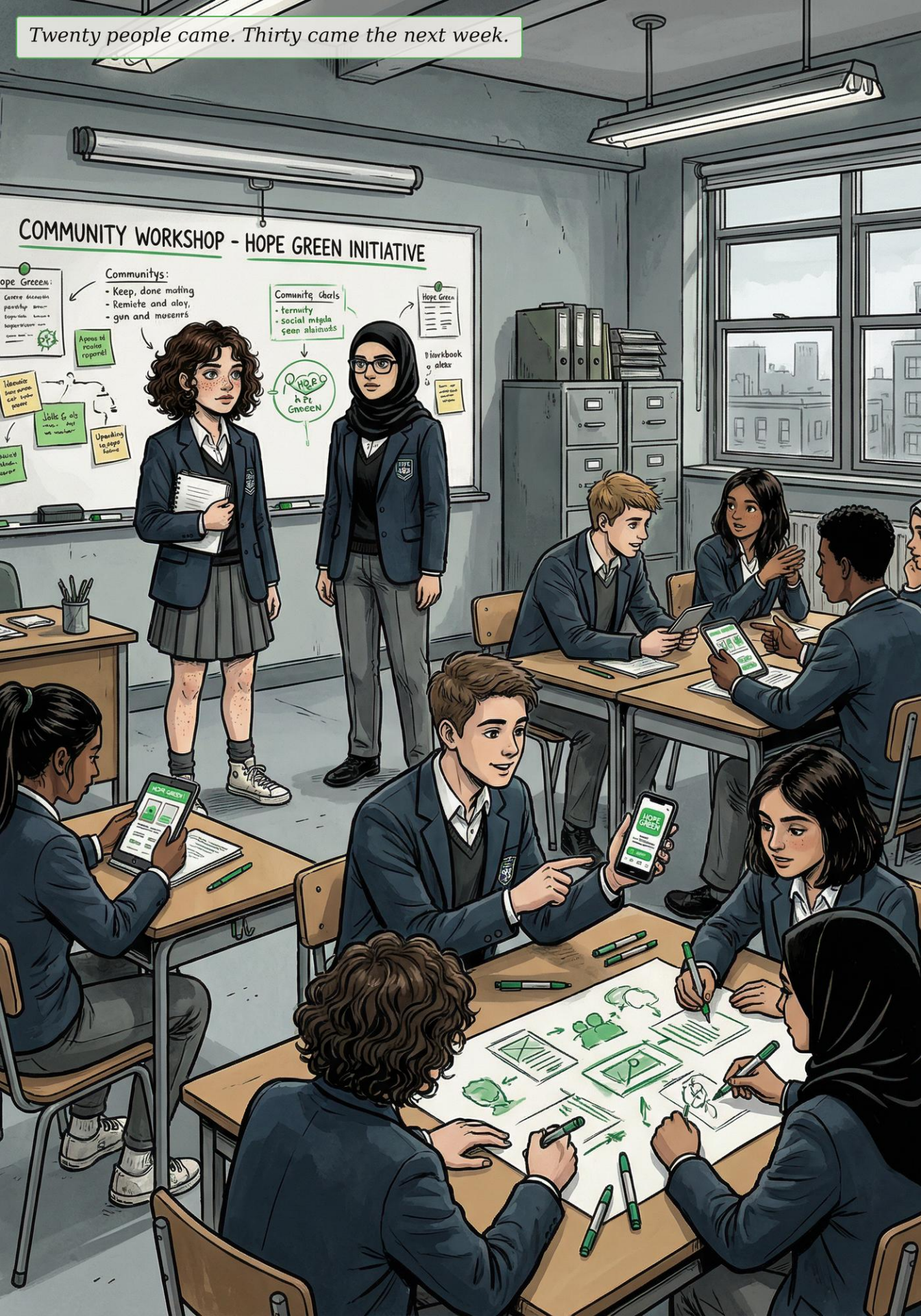
**GARY!!!**

~~Previous attempts~~



Rules: Evidence only.  
No personal attacks.  
Listen first.

Twenty people came. Thirty came the next week.



# COMMUNITY WORKSHOP - HOPE GREEN INITIATIVE

**Communities:**

- Keep, done mating
- Remiete and aloy,
- gun and mosents

**Communities charts**

- ternity
- social migtala
- qeap alainods

**Hope Green**

**Workbook of alex**

**Appes id roates ropore!**

**Uppending to apps Redone**

**Skills & als**

**Identite busy parase cap. Expor-porant**

**Communiti charts**

**Hope Green**



The toolkit took three drafts. The third one was honest.

# MEDIA LITERACY TOOLKIT — v.3

(the honest one)

← This one  
is honest.

## Section 1: THE 3-CLICK RULE

1. Who published this — real outlet?
2. Find it on 2 other sources
3. Check the DATE — is it even new?



## Section 2: ALSO CHECK

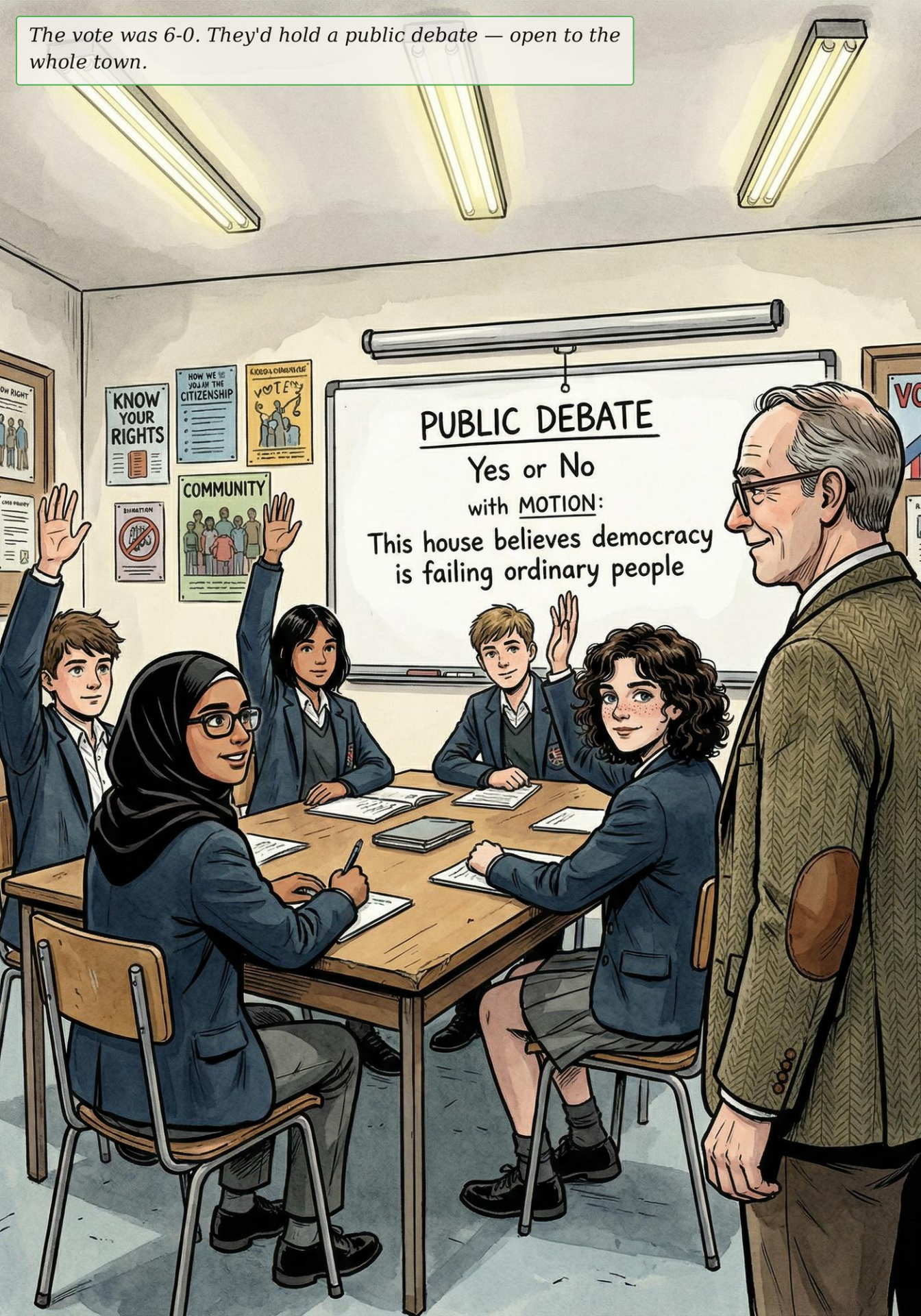
- Does headline match the actual article?
- Experts quoted BY NAME?
- Makes you angry? RED FLAG — verify before sharing.



## Section 3: WHAT TO DO

- 👍 If TRUE: share carefully
- 💬 If FALSE: explain gently
- 🤔 If UNSURE: wait.

The vote was 6-0. They'd hold a public debate — open to the whole town.



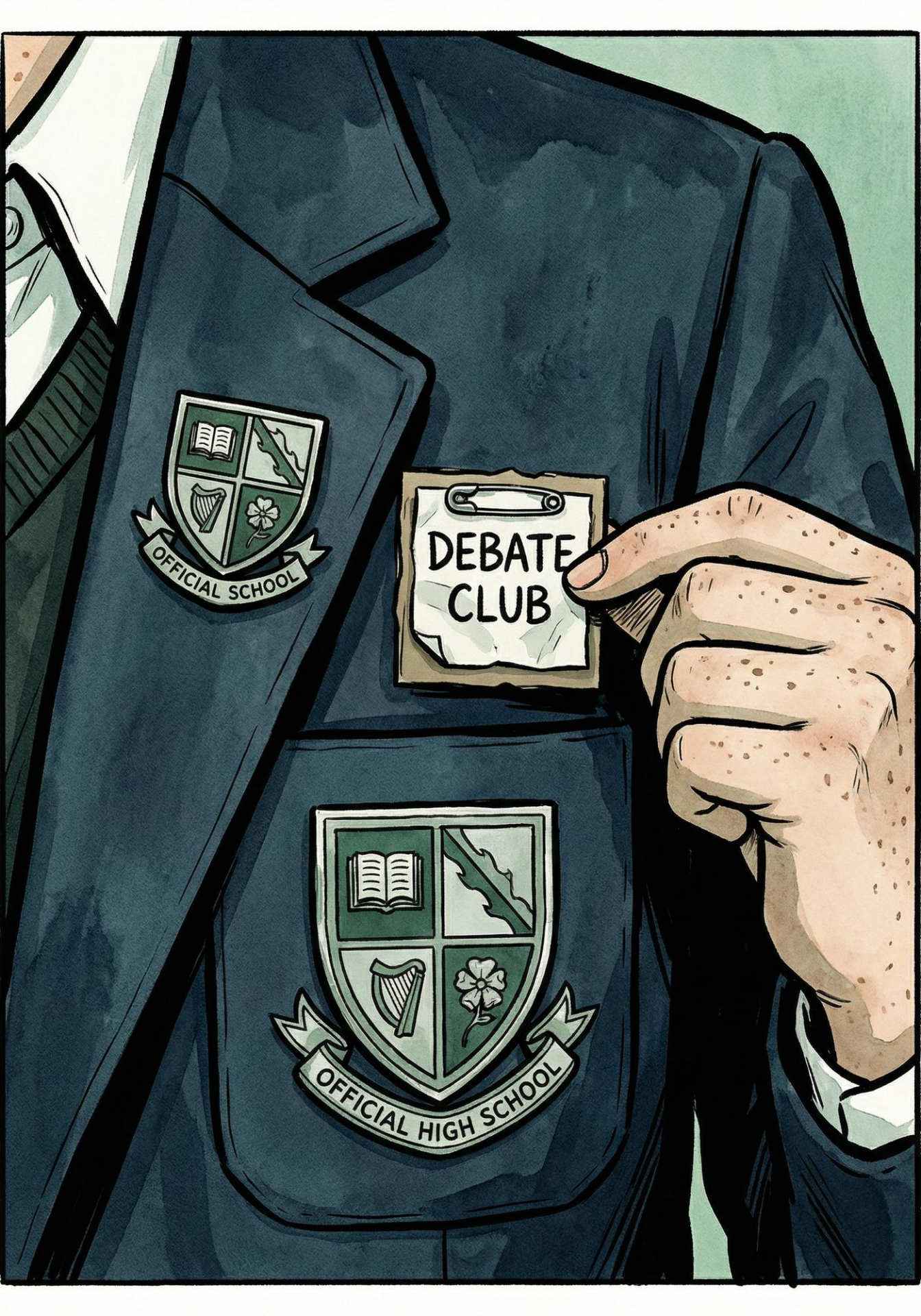
You want me to come to your school?

I want you to debate me. At school. About populism.



Alex spends the next week preparing for the debate.



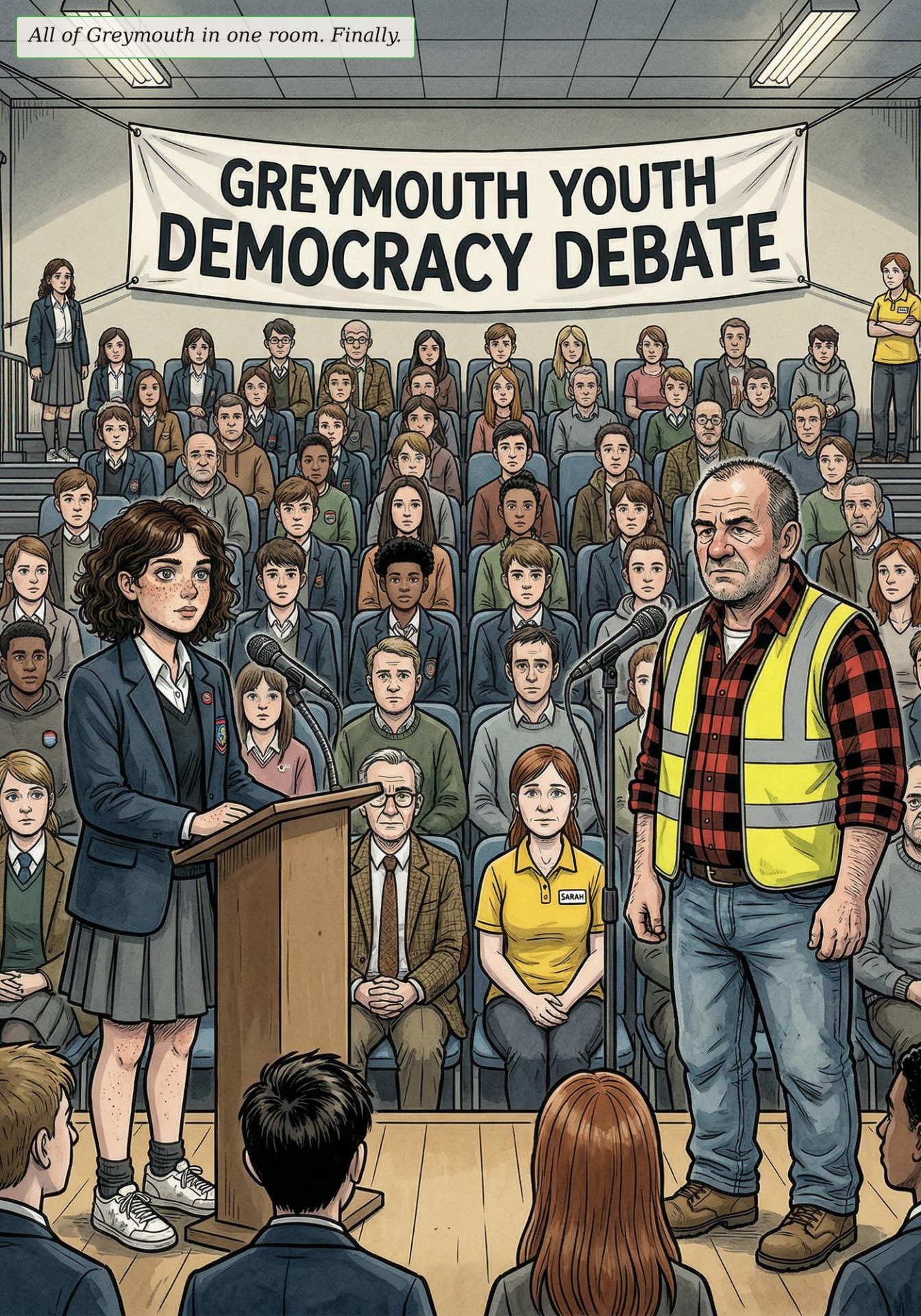


*This is what it feels like to stand for something.*



All of Greymouth in one room. Finally.

# GREYMOUTH YOUTH DEMOCRACY DEBATE



I watched my mates lose everything. Don't tell me I got it wrong.



I know, Gary. But who do we blame — and are we blaming the right people?



The room was quiet. Then someone started clapping.



You did good, love. I still think I'm right.

That's fine, Gary. As long as you read the fact-check.



## Chapter 6

# The Balanced Path

Not the end. The beginning of the work.

The next morning.



Alex checks her phone.



The cracked pavements look the same. But the town is watching.

Uncle Gary's going to kill me.



That was a huge success, thanks to you two.

We didn't expect it to go that well.

Gary's going to need some time.



*Nobody marched. Nobody chanted. Nobody got arrested. But something shifted.*

Can you help us start a debate club?

How do I register to vote?

We created a monster.

We created a movement. Small difference.



That afternoon, after school.

You embarrassed me.

I know. I'm sorry.

...But you weren't wrong about everything.



*Inside, over a pot of tea.*

The shipyard closing wasn't immigrants' fault. I know that. I've always known that.

But someone said they'd fix it. And no one else was even talking about it. What was I supposed to do? Just accept it?

No. You were supposed to be angry. You were RIGHT to be angry. But there are better answers than blame.



The following day in class.

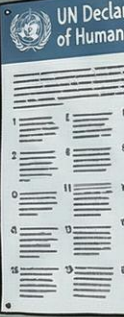
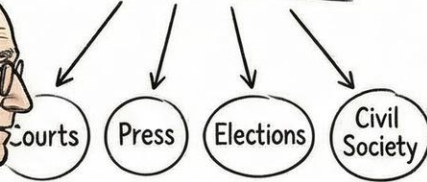
Today's final topic: Can we solve real problems without populism?

So it's not just about voting?

Voting's the floor. Not the ceiling.



# DEMOCRACY: WHO PROTECTS IT?



Every question she asked led to ten more. That's not a problem. That's what thinking looks like.





Months later. Small changes. Real ones.

Alex's workshop became the template.



The online forum has quietened. Some members moved to civic engagement instead.

...Actually. Let me check that.



I'm not going to more rallies.

What do I do with it then?

You don't have to give up being angry.

Come to the council meeting next week. Be angry AT THE COUNCIL. With evidence.



Gary laughs — first time he's laughed in ages.

You're a bloody nightmare, you know that?

Must run in the family.

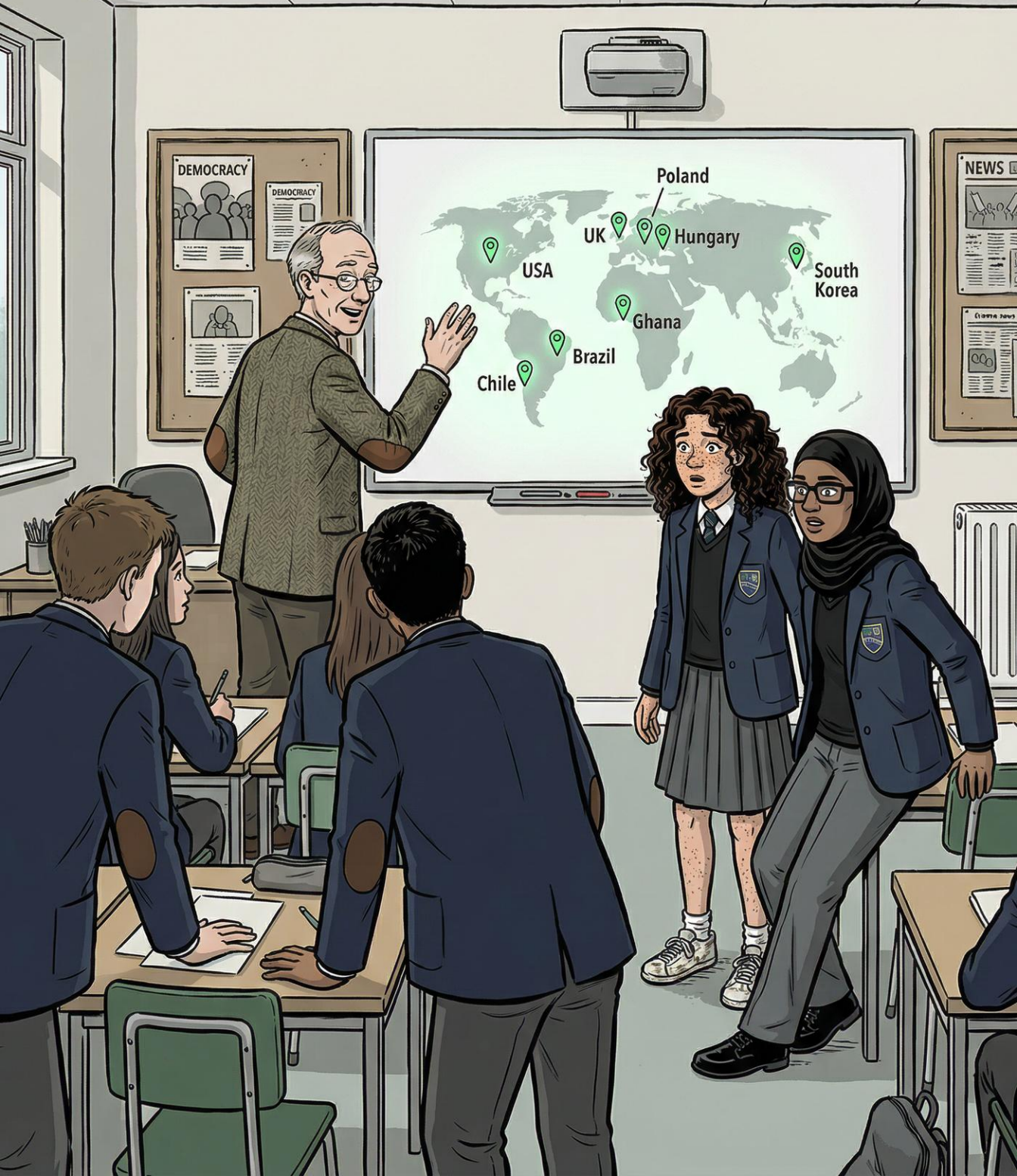


*She hadn't expected this. That Greymouth was part of something bigger.*

Poland, Hungary, USA, Brazil, UK — young people pushing back in every country.

We're not alone.

Never were. Just didn't know where to look.



Plans form: Exchange programme with Polish students who flipped their election. Zoom with Hungarian activists.

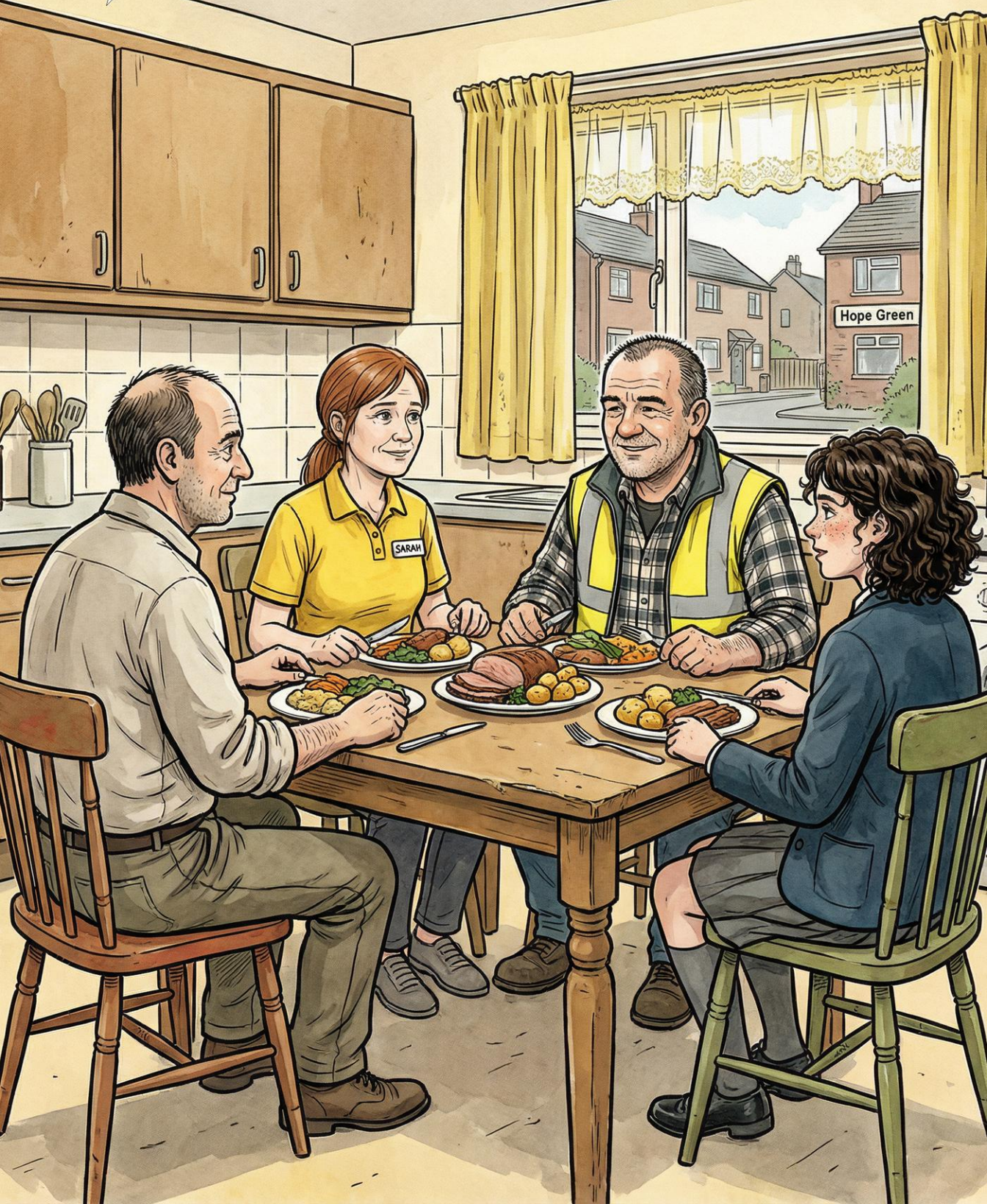


Sunday dinner. The whole family. Rare.

...That's probably not the full picture, is it?

Probably not.

Put the news off. Let's actually talk.



*Nobody has all the answers. But she knows the right questions now. And that is enough.*



Start local. Start young. This keeps coming up.



# How to Start a Debate Club

journalism  
memoirs  
debatists

Hand  
nalia

50 members  
in 100 colleges  
to search for  
pages

and a  
reference  
units  
not word  
ontology  
it-  
to-  
in-  
mes-

1. Find a teacher mentor  
↳ sketch fed



cannot  
teacher  
post

2. Get members crowds



3. Book a room doorned key  
1. door-key  
2. listed



Full-bleed

find science

4. Pick topics debate



mespoaring  
for hand  
metteak

formula  
benteuin

# 3-Click Rule for Spotting Disinformation

Cent  
presen  
meat

1. Source Check  
<https://www.url.com/URL>



2. Original Post, social media



3. Cross-Reference factual icons



# How to Pitch Policy to Local Council

How  
gun  
to

1. Research Issues



2. Gather Student Voices

3. Formulate Solution



# Glossary & Resources

## KEY TERMS

### Populism

A political style that divides society into ‘the pure people’ vs ‘the corrupt elite.’ It claims to speak for ordinary people against a rigged system. It can come from the left or the right.

### Democracy

Government by the people, through free elections, protected rights, independent courts, and rule of law. It requires all four pillars to function.

### Disinformation

Deliberately false information spread to deceive. Different from misinformation, which is false but shared without intent to mislead.

### Algorithm

A set of rules used by social media platforms to decide what you see — and what you don’t. Algorithms prioritise content that generates engagement, which often means content that generates anger.

### Gerrymandering

Manipulating electoral boundaries to favour one party or group. A tool used to undermine fair representation.

### Echo Chamber

A media environment where you only encounter views that confirm your own. Created by algorithms, self-selection, or deliberate isolation.

## GET INVOLVED

- UK Youth Parliament: [ukyouthparliament.org.uk](http://ukyouthparliament.org.uk)
- Votes at 16: [votes-at-16.org.uk](http://votes-at-16.org.uk)
- Full Fact: [fullfact.org](http://fullfact.org) — free fact-checking resource
- Shout Out UK: [shoutoutuk.org](http://shoutoutuk.org) — youth political literacy
- BBC Young Reporter programme

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Is the UK a full democracy? What would make it more democratic?
- Should the voting age be lowered to 16? What are the arguments for and against?
- How do you tell the difference between a reliable source and misinformation?
- What responsibilities come with freedom of speech?

# How This Was Made

This book began with a single instruction to an AI assistant in April 2026:

*'Plan a graphic book to educate young people on the rise of populism in the West. Fact-based. A learning tool. Counter extremism. Value moderate centrist politics. Give the reader an ability to question the capitalist imperative.'*

From that, the AI produced a research brief, chapter outlines, visual style guidance, and a complete script for all six chapters — in a single session.

---

## THE ARTISTIC STYLE PROMPT

Every illustration was generated using a variation of:

*'Social realism graphic novel style, Persepolis meets Shane Meadows. Ink outlines, limited colour wash.'*

Six colours were specified across the whole book: Industrial Gray, Rainy Blue, Factory Rust, Patriotic Red, Rally Gold, and Hope Green — each carrying meaning within the story.

---

## THE CHARACTER PROMPTS

Alex: '15-year-old girl, curly shoulder-length dark brown hair, very prominent freckles, hazel eyes, navy school blazer with shield crest badge on front chest, white shirt, grey pleated skirt, scuffed white trainers.'

Uncle Gary: 'Hi-vis yellow vest over checked flannel shirt — must have both. Stocky, weathered, short dark stubble, receding dark hair.'

Dad: 'GPE factory overalls, thinning hair, dark circles, defeated and slumped. Not bald.'

Mr Henderson: 'Tweed jacket with elbow patches — always. Wire-rimmed glasses — always.'

---

## KEY DECISIONS

Setting: 'A real place is open to faults being found by people who know it.' — Greymouth replaced Hartlepool.

The factory: 'The workers look more industrial — some kind of light engineering?' — GPE replaced the original food factory.

The timeline: 'Pick one and stick to it throughout. I think Now.'

---

## WHAT THE AI COULD NOT DO

It could not care. It did not know whether this book should exist, who needed it, or what was at stake. Every meaningful decision — the argument, the setting, the characters, the politics, the urgency — was human.

*The AI compressed time. The book is mine.*

## Democracy at the Edge

In Greymouth — a fictional northern English town where the factory just closed — fifteen-year-old Alex is trying to understand why her family is splitting apart over politics.

What she discovers, online and at a rally and in her uncle's kitchen, takes her from outrage to investigation. How do lies spread faster than facts? Why do people choose belonging over truth? And what can one teenager actually do about it?

A powerful, unflinching, and ultimately hopeful graphic novel for readers aged fourteen and up. Part story, part education. Entirely urgent.

Suitable for GCSE Citizenship · PSHE · Media Studies · History · Politics



ISBN