

‘We have to flip the AI debate towards hope’: Labour’s techno-optimist, Darren Jones

Publication Date: 2023-07-04

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Section: Technology

Tags: Artificial intelligence (AI), Observer business profile, Labour, Keir Starmer, Computing, interviews

Article URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jul/04/we-have-to-flip-the-ai-debate-towards-hope-labours-techno-optimist-darren-jones>



‘It’s an upgrade. In the same way as you upgrade your iPhone, we need to upgrade Britain.’ Labour MP Darren Jones believes artificial intelligence will bring an economic change on the scale of the industrial revolution, which politicians must be ready to shape. As chair of the business and trade select committee, the ambitious 36-year-old backbencher, who represents Bristol North West, has built a reputation for himself in Westminster as a tough interrogator. With speculation raging last week about the future of Thames Water, he took to the airwaves to criticise the way the heavily indebted sector has been regulated, saying he was “increasingly sick” of its failures. However, Jones is at his most animated when talking about AI. He has clashed with company bosses over their use of technology to monitor and control staff – including at Amazon and Royal Mail. But he is an evangelist for the upsides of innovation, including the arrival of large language models (LLMs) such as the hit dialogue-based AI software ChatGPT. “It’s really important that we flip this debate. Lots of people will have started to hear about AI and human extinction and job losses, and they will associate it with anxiety or fear,” the MP says. “But we’re not going to get widespread adoption of technology in the economy unless people want to use it. So we have to flip the debate towards hope – hope of better pay, better work, better public services.” He believes the potential productivity improvements that could be available – if the technology is adopted in the right way – could help drag the UK out of the economic doldrums. Jones thinks there is a distinctive Labour approach here, which involves embracing AI while setting clear constraints on how it is adopted in order to protect workers, and making training and support available to help those affected to transition to new jobs. “The state should be in there making the case: we welcome this technology, we want to adopt it – but there are certain requirements, about the social impact, about privacy, about security, about equality, that we will guarantee as part of that process,” he says. Jones made similar points in a House of Commons debate on AI last week. Keir Starmer made his own view clear earlier this month, with the Labour leader warning that the country was at an “inflection point”, and if the adoption of AI was not well managed, the consequences could mirror the de-industrialisation of the 1980s. Rishi Sunak’s government has until recently appeared to favour a laissez-faire stance, using its AI white paper to hail the benefits of the technology, but the prime minister has since highlighted some of the potential risks and will be hosting a global “AI safety” summit in the autumn. Jones argues the catastrophic risks recently raised by some of the AI sector’s leading figures could, with political will, be relatively easily managed. Only a small number of tech giants have access to the massive computing power it needs, he says, so that “it’s quite easy in terms of oversight – sharing of information, collaboration, maybe a bit about licensing access to these very sophisticated computers”. As a former technology

lawyer, he is critical of the AI act recently approved by the European parliament, which he believes could stifle innovation. However, he also warns against the no-holds-barred approach of the US. "I ... don't think the European approach is in the interests of Britain, and I think we can carve out a third way," he says. That phrase, resonant of Tony Blair in his prime, may be telling. Jones was swept into Westminster in the summer of 2017, when Jeremy Corbyn wiped out Theresa May's majority and took Glastonbury by storm, but he is no Corbynista. High on a shelf in his Westminster office is a snap of him sporting a red rosette, standing proudly outside the council flat in Lawrence Weston, Bristol, where he grew up, in the area he now represents. In his maiden speech, he pointed out that he was the first Darren ever elected to the Commons. Jones says the policies of Blair's 1997 Labour government transformed his life. The national minimum wage boosted the pay of both his parents – his dad was a security guard and his mum an NHS administrator. His secondary school was one of the worst-performing in the country but he took part in Labour's Young, Gifted and Talented programme for bright kids in state schools, which helped him to get a place at Plymouth University. "I got to go to university because the government put it in front of me," he says, bluntly. While not promising that things can only get better, as per Blair's 1997 election anthem, he does believe a heavy dose of techno-optimism should be central to Labour's pitch. "It should be, in my view, at the heart of our plan to transform the country, and at the heart of our political vision – but you would have to anchor it in people's concerns and experiences," he says. "We should not be talking about AI, we should be talking about improving the quality of education for our kids, or clearing the backlogs in the NHS, or getting people better jobs – and making the case that all of that is delivered through technology." He believes the state's role is not to try to impose technological solutions from Whitehall, but provide what he calls "core, central digital infrastructure" and then build an "ecosystem" that encourages and rewards innovation. "I don't think we should be announcing hundred-million-quid, top-down transformation programmes of public services, because traditionally they've always failed," he says. "It has to be bottom-up-led innovation." After Sunak's recent departmental rejig, science and technology are no longer under the aegis of Jones's committee, formerly known as the business, energy and industrial strategy committee, which now covers business and trade. Asked if he might fancy a position on Starmer's frontbench – perhaps in the as-yet-unfilled role of shadow secretary of state for science and technology – Jones says he's not lobbying for a job. But he admits: "If Keir asked me to do something, then of course I would say yes, because I want the party to win and I would be delighted to be a part of securing that." CV Age 36 Family "Wife, two children, third on the way. All girls!" Education Human bioscience at University of Plymouth; law at the University of the West of England and University of Law. Pay £103,938 (£86,584 MP salary and £17,354 committee chair salary). Last holiday St Ives, Cornwall. Best advice he's been given Work hard, be nice, help others. Biggest career mistake "Calling for the Covid vaccine tsar, Dame Kate Bingham, to be sacked before her work (and that of the NHS) literally saved us all." Word he overuses AI. How he relaxes "Mostly cooking, playing the piano and, when I have enough time, painting."