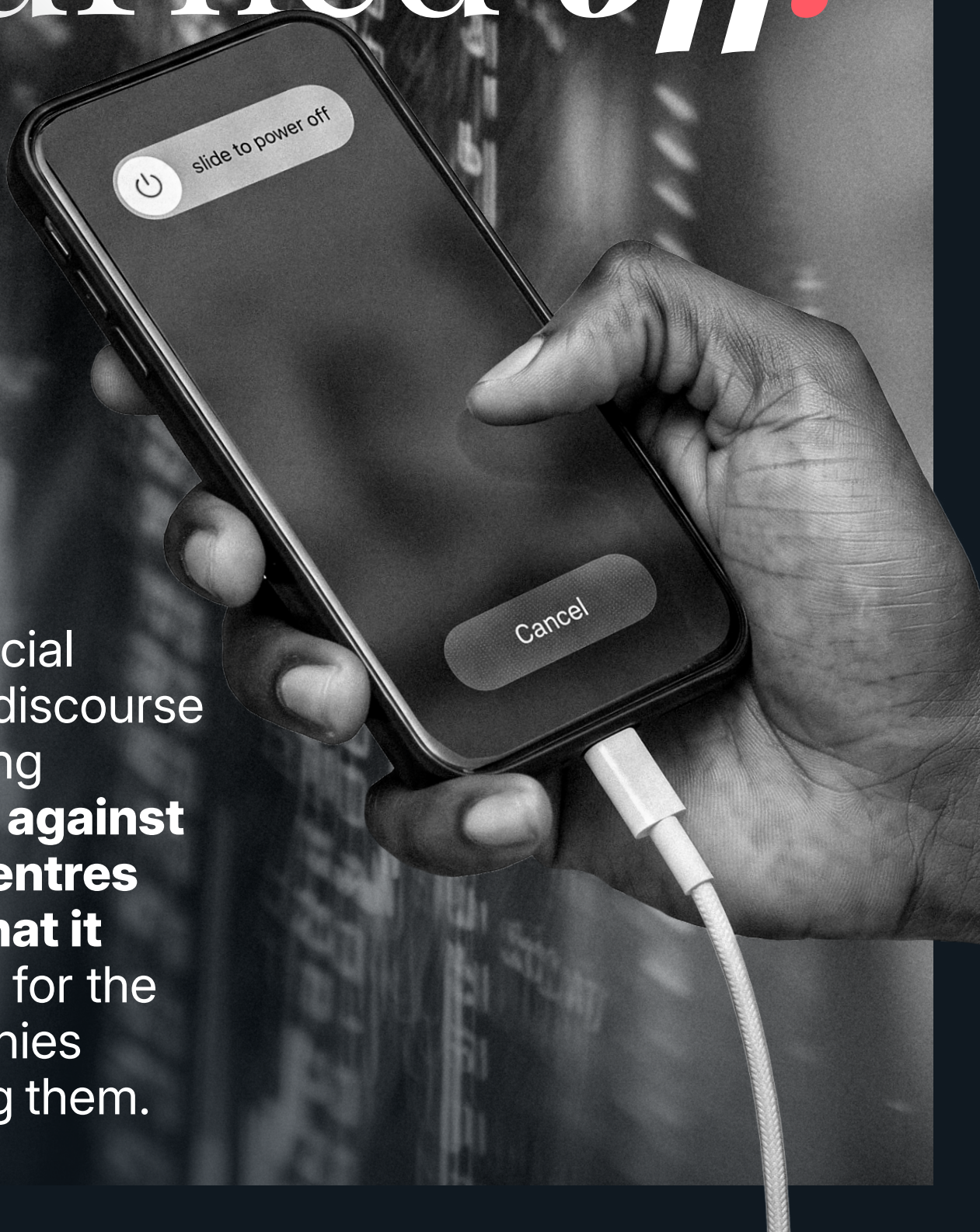
CAVENDISH

Plugged *in*, turned *off*.



How social media discourse is turning **Britain against data centres and what it means** for the companies building them.

“*Nobody* voted for ***this***.”

That line keeps coming up. It appears under pictures of farmland in Fife, under renders of server halls in west London, and in threads about hosepipe bans, energy bills and Big Tech.

At the start of 2026, data centres were a niche topic for planning committees and energy wonks. By the summer, they had become one of the most combustible issues in British politics online. They are blamed for drought, for bills, for lost countryside, for a creaking grid, and for a government that seems to tell households one thing and tech companies another.

Some of this is about AI. Much of it isn’t. At its heart is something older and more human: communities want to know who is building near them, why it matters and what it means for them. Too often, critics are answering those questions first.

We tracked what the UK’s most influential political voices online have said about data centres since 1 January 2026. The findings should worry anyone trying to build one.

In numbers:

1m+

UK public mentions and media articles on data centres since January

7:1

Negative posts outnumber positive ones by almost seven to one

#1

Water was the most discussed theme of the year, way ahead of energy, grid and bills

2

the number of accounts that drove 62% of all engagement

5%

The share of engagement generated by the government and pro-growth voices making the case for data centres

4x

The jump in monthly data centre conversation between the first four months of the year and the summer



Five things you ***need to know.***

This went mainstream in the summer.
The conversation quadrupled from May, driven by a run of moments that turned data centres from abstract infrastructure into something tangible and resented.

Critics own the conversation.
Opponents on the left and the populist right generate more than nine in ten engagements. The case for data centres barely registers.

Water is the weak spot.
A drought summer gave critics their most powerful image: hosepipe bans for us, unlimited water for server farms.

It’s a backyard fight as much as an AI fight.
The posts that travel furthest are about specific places – Fife, Brick Lane, west London – not about compute or sovereignty.

A handful of voices set the terms.
Two accounts drove most of the engagement. Neither are household names, but their framing is travelling.

The year *data centres* went ***mainstream.***

For the first four months of 2026, the conversation around data centres was simmering. By the summer, they were boiling over – among politicians, among commentators, and across the country.

Since January, data centres have been mentioned more than a million times in UK social media posts and news articles. This is no longer a conversation confined to planning committees and energy wonks. It's a public argument.

What makes it striking is how the conversation grew. It wasn't simply driven from the top.

- **The public got there first.** Between January and March, wider mentions of data centres rose by around 45%, while the agenda-setters we track – MPs, ministers, journalists, commentators and campaigners – barely moved. Something was already stirring.
- **May lit the fuse.** In a single month, posts from agenda-setters more than tripled and wider mentions more than doubled. From May to September, the public conversation ran at around twice its early-year level, at roughly 140,000 mentions a month. Agenda-setter activity ran at four times its earlier level.
- **Agenda-setters kept it burning.** Wider mentions peaked in June and eased through the late summer. Agenda-setter activity kept climbing, peaking in August and staying high into September. The influencers didn't start the fire, but they kept feeding it. Each new moment – a drought, an approval, a vote – got picked up, reframed and pushed back out.

And it isn't fading. Halfway through October, both measures are on pace to match their summer levels.

1m+

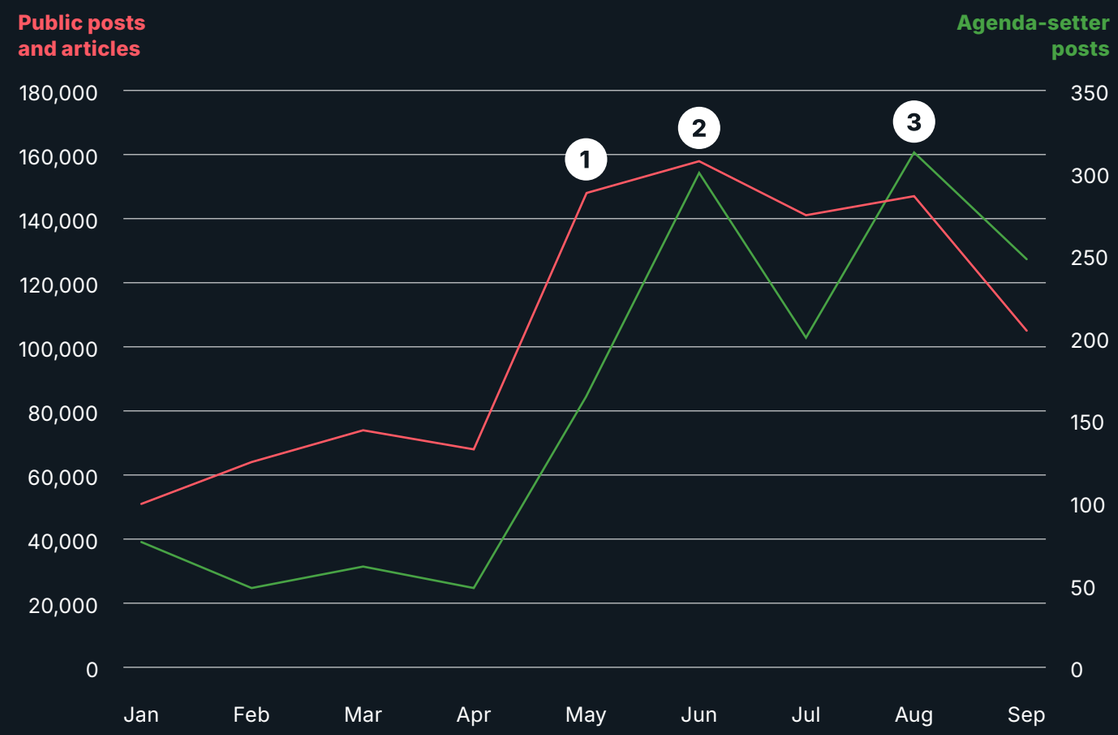
UK public mentions and media articles on data centres since January

2x

Growth in the wider conversation from spring to summer

4x

Growth among agenda-setters over the same period



What drove the ***spikes:***

1. **May: "Net Zero for us, not for them."** Tony Blair's intervention on Net Zero and early hosepipe-ban warnings set households' sacrifice against Big Tech's appetite for power and water.
2. **June: "Not here."** Auchtertool went national, plans for gas-powered sites drew fire from left and right, and a data centre replacing Warrington's Unilever factory became a symbol of how little communities get back.
3. **August: "Over our heads."** Drought met planning approvals. Ministers overruled Tower Hamlets on Brick Lane, and more west London sites were approved in the middle of the drought.

Source: Cavendish analysis of Meltwater data, 1 January – 30 September 2026. Agenda-setters are MPs, ministers, journalists, commentators and campaigners

The backyard *problem.*

Strip away the AI and you're left with the oldest story in planning.

The posts that travel furthest aren't about compute, sovereignty or chips. They're about a specific field, a specific village and a specific view.

Auchtertool in Fife has around 200 homes. It has become a national symbol thanks to a proposed campus described online as the length of 100 football pitches, with more than 1,200 formal objections lodged. Annan, Caernarfon, Chigwell, Larbert and Hermiston each have their own campaign, and every new application creates new content.

The language is visceral and it works.

"Monstrosity."

"Rammed through."

"Plastering the countryside."

Pictures of rolling farmland do more damage than any spreadsheet.

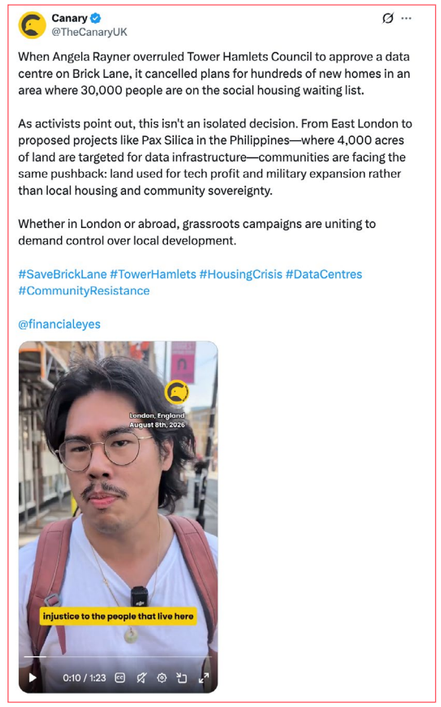
This is where the issue becomes dangerous for developers, because it lets critics oppose a project without opposing progress. You don't have to be anti-AI or anti-growth to object to a data centre. You just have to believe it's in the wrong place, built for the wrong reasons, by people who won't live with the consequences.

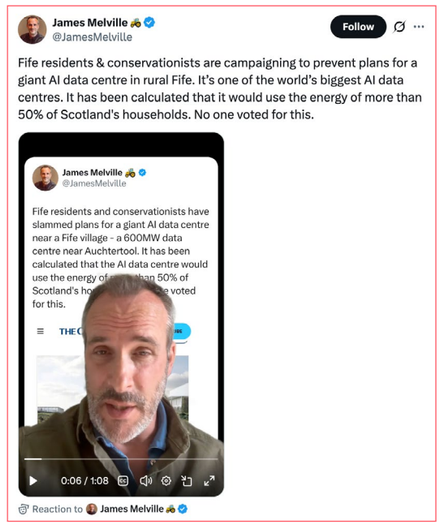
When local decisions are overturned, the story gets worse. Brick Lane is the clearest example. A council refused the scheme, the government approved it anyway, and a housing-versus-data-centre story wrote itself. For critics on the left it was proof that Big Tech outranks local democracy. For critics on the right, it was proof that Westminster doesn't care what communities think.

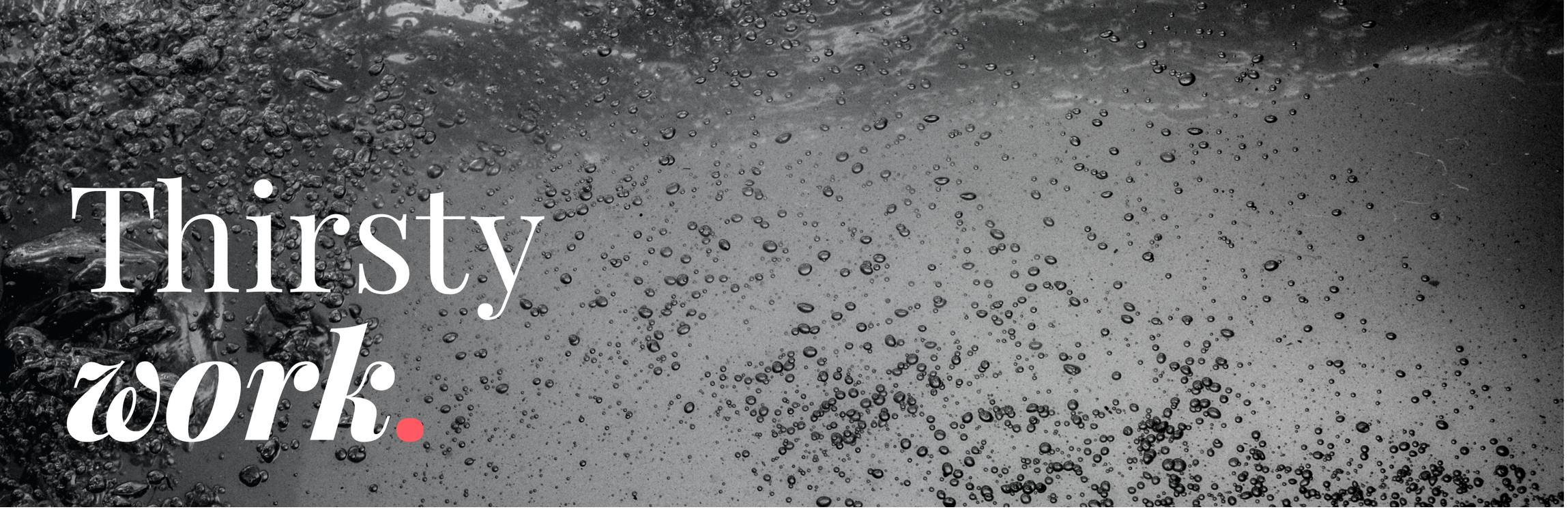












Thirsty *work.*

If there is one issue developers should be losing sleep over, it's water.

Water was the most discussed theme of 2026, appearing in more than one in five data centre posts across the year, and more than a third in July.

The reason is simple. Energy is abstract, but a hosepipe ban is personal. When people are told to stop watering their gardens while server farms are approved down the road, they don't need a briefing paper to feel aggrieved.

The best-performing posts of the summer all followed the same template:

- **The contrast.** Household restrictions set against data centre consumption.
- **The number.** Litres per day, often unsourced but always enormous.
- **The villain.** Water companies, Big Tech, or the government – often all three.

Water is also where the left and right sound almost identical. Zarah Sultana and Caroline Lucas made the same point as James Melville and Leilani Dowding. Clive Lewis linked a £3.4bn rise in water bills to the cost of supplying data centres. Tom Harwood countered that worries about data centre water use are overblown, but his post reached a fraction of the audience.

Developers have a ***real story*** to tell here.

Closed-loop and waterless cooling are increasingly standard. But that story is barely being told, and in its absence, the worst assumption wins.

James Melville 🚜
@JamesMelville

Follow

Britain's water strategy in a nutshell:

- Sell off 35 reservoirs since 2017.
- Build no new reservoirs for 34 years.
- Approve 500 data centres that drink water like camels on a bender.

Then, the second the sun shows its face for a few weeks in summer, the water companies slap hosepipe bans on us.

Ah yes. The sacred Great British summer ritual: standing in a parched garden while a giant data centre in Slough is quietly necking enough water to keep a small town's lawns green forever...so that someone in California can generate another AI image of a cat wearing a monocle.

But don't worry. When your roses finally croak, just remember: the cloud never goes thirsty.

Priorities, Britain.

Clive Lewis MP
@labourlewis

And here's the sucker punch.

A big chunk of this £3.4bn water bill hike about to hit every single one of us, is in effect a subsidy for big-tech, corporate data centres!

Here's how:

Within that £3.4bn sits £477m specifically to serve new housebuilding and data centre development.

United Utilities received the largest single approval, £995m, partly for water infrastructure serving data centres in east Manchester.

Read that again. Households in drought, under hosepipe bans, are being asked to fund the water infrastructure for data centres.

The bill for corporate demand is being socialised through the domestic tariff, in the middle of a supply emergency.

We pay for the infrastructure, we pay for the debt, we pay for the profits, and roughly a third of what we pay goes out as returns to investors and creditors.

Only public ownership will stop this daylight robbery.

Caroline Lucas
@CarolineLucas

Govt planning c. 100 new data centres by early 2030s, mostly in water stressed areas - with no legal duty to disclose how much water they use. Meanwhile Govt launches £75m publicity campaign to urge us to reduce water use & privatised water companies waste 19% thro leaks. Madness

Mapping the ***backlash.***

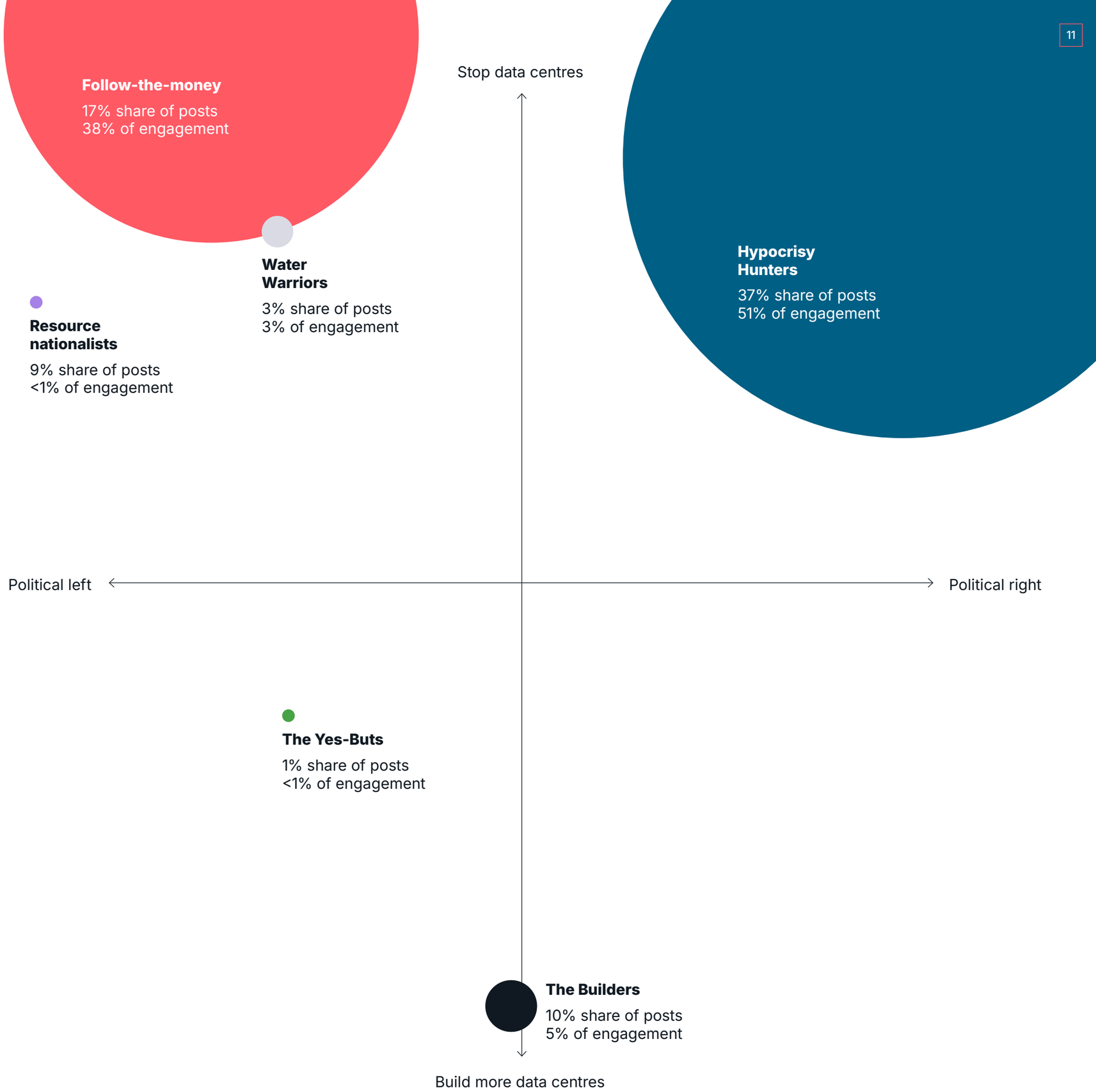
The data centre debate is actually six, running at once.

Across the agenda-setters we tracked, six distinct tribes emerge. Each has its own politics, its own priorities and its own villain. We've mapped them on two measures: where they sit politically, from left to right, and where they stand on data centres, from "stop them" to "build more". The size of each bubble shows how much engagement that tribe generates. In other words, how many people are actually listening.

The picture is stark. The two biggest bubbles sit in opposite top corners. The Hypocrisy Hunters on the populist right and the Follow-the-Money Left have almost nothing in common politically, yet between them they drive nearly nine in ten engagements on data centres. Both want to stop them.

Down at the bottom, the Builders are the only tribe making the case for data centres, and their bubble is barely visible.

That's why this matters. This isn't a left-versus-right fight that a change of government will settle. It's opposition coming from both flanks at once, while the case for the industry goes largely unheard. Right now, data centres are losing the argument by default.



Many tribes, ***one*** grievance.

They can't agree on Net Zero, AI or who should run the country. But on data centres, they're telling the same story.

Spend a week inside each tribe's timeline and you'd think you'd been following six different debates.

One is about kettles and hosepipes. Another is about offshore accounts and housing waiting lists. A third is about reservoirs, a fourth about Scottish land, a fifth about planning powers, and the last about what electricity costs in America.

Listen closely, though, and the same story keeps coming back. Someone powerful wants something big. It will use our energy, our water and our land. Nobody asked us, and we won't see much in return.

That story is the industry's biggest problem, and the tribes are the best guide to fixing it. Each has a different fear, a different villain and a different price for its support. Know which tribe you're talking to, and you'll know which argument you're really having.



Plugged in, turned off - October 2026

The *Hypocrisy Hunters*.



Populist right: "Rules for us. None for them."

Who: James Melville, Leilani Dowding, Neil Oliver, Allison Pearson, Bev Turner

They care about: Energy, water, countryside

They blame: A government that preaches Net Zero to households and waves through Big Tech

They aren't against technology. They're against double standards. Every hosepipe ban, wood burner rule and tethered bottle cap becomes another exhibit in the case against you.

The *Follow-the-Money* Left.



Anti-Big Tech left: "Who profits? Who pays?"

Who: Blade of the Sun, Novara Media, the Canary, Prem Sikka, Jeremy Corbyn, Richard Burgon

They care about: Bills, jobs, subsidy, ownership

They blame: Billionaires taking public resources for private profit

They read the small print: who owns the site, where it's registered, what it pays in tax and how many people it really employs. Their sharpest attacks pair a local injustice with a global villain.

The *Water Warriors*.



Greens and environmental left: "Every litre counts"

Who: Zack Polanski, Caroline Lucas, Chris Hinchliff

They care about: Water. Nearly half their posts mention it.

They blame: A government putting tech demand ahead of climate and water security

A small tribe with a sharp focus. They're turning data centres into a party dividing line, and their push for water disclosure is the demand most likely to end up in regulation.

The *Resource Nationalists*.



Scottish pro-independence left: "Not yours to take"

Who: Bella Caledonia, Lustra Skye, Scotland's community campaign groups

They care about: Land, democracy, foreign ownership

They blame: Overseas companies extracting Scotland's energy, land and water

They post more than the Water Warriors and the Yes-Buts combined, but get almost no engagement, because they aren't chasing it. Their influence shows up in objection letters and Holyrood votes.

The *Yes Buts*.



Conditional centre left: "Yes… if…"

Who: Clive Lewis, Liam Byrne, Chi Onwurah

They care about: Transparency, local control, a fair return

They blame: An industry that hasn't yet earned public trust

The most persuadable tribe on the map. They accept the case for data centres but want it earned. Lewis's four tests are audited reporting, real planning powers, clarity on ownership and a meaningful local return.

The *Builders*.



Pro-growth right and government: "Build it, Britain."

Who: Claire Coutinho, Andrew Neil, Tom Harwood, Reem Ibrahim, Kanishka Narayan

They care about: Growth, competitiveness, energy costs

They blame: Net Zero and high energy prices driving investment abroad

The only tribe arguing for data centres, and the one least heard. They see compute as national infrastructure and warn that Britain is pricing itself out of the AI race.

The case nobody is ***hearing.***

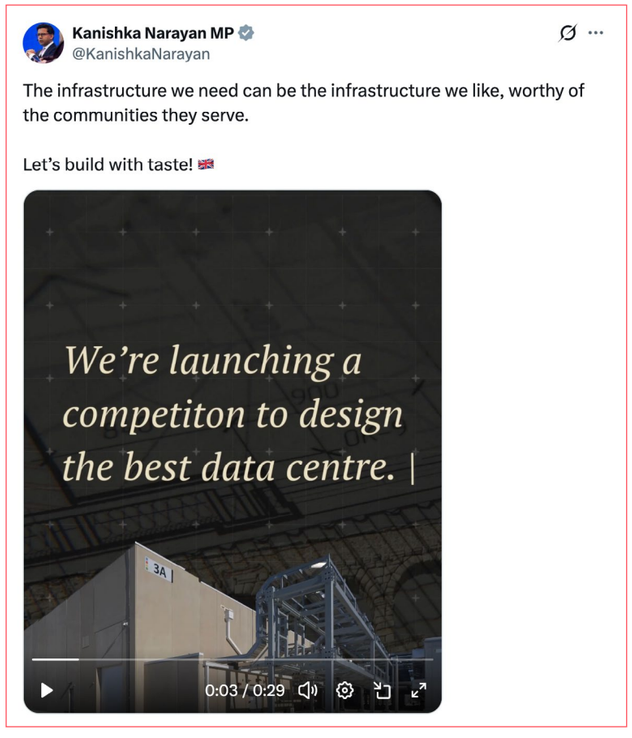
There is a case for data centres being made.
But almost nobody is listening to it.

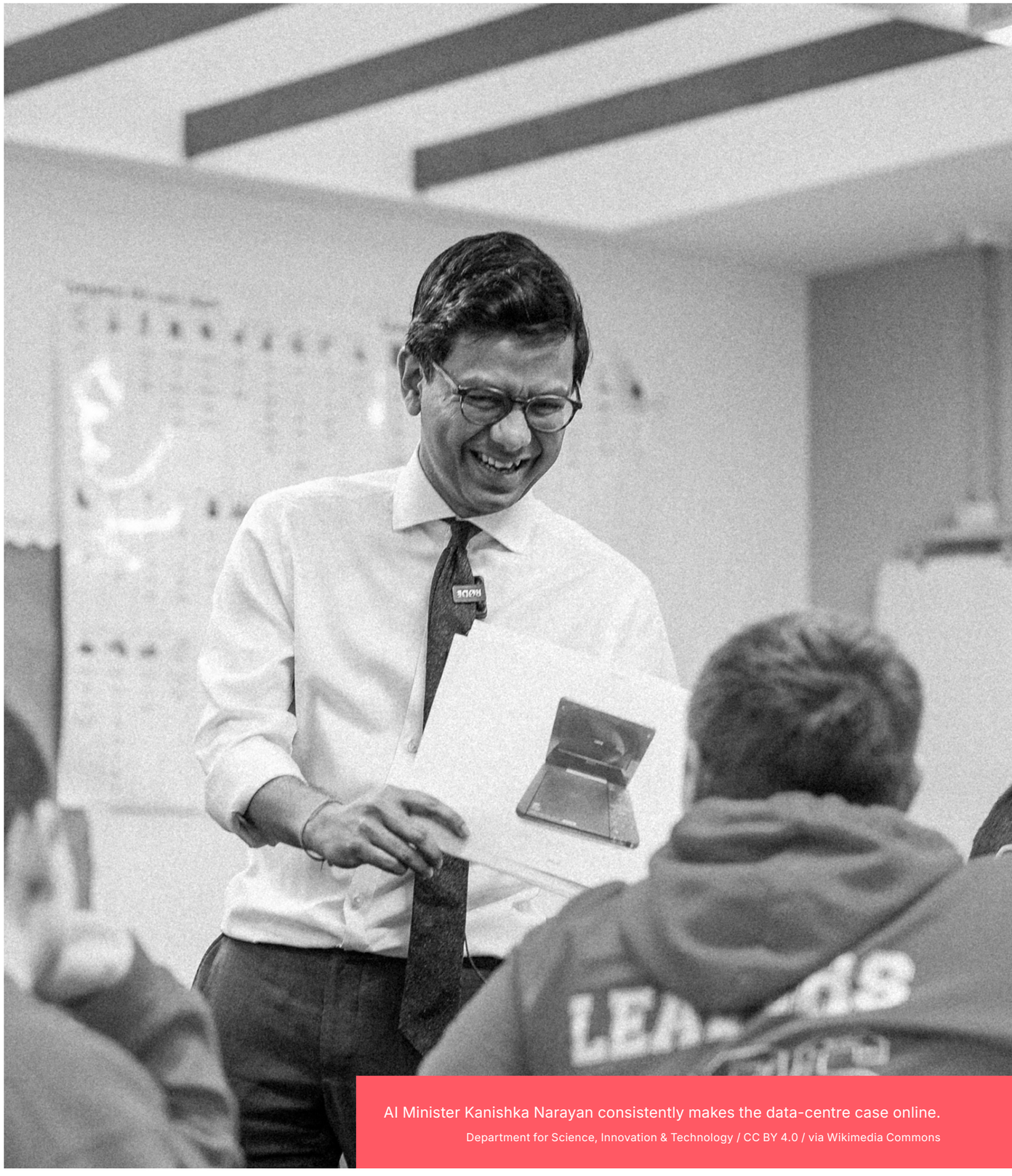
Government ministers and pro-growth voices made up around one in ten posts about data centres this year, but generated just 5% of the engagement. Journalists and energy experts, who often add context, generated less than 1%.

The contrast is stark. Energy analyst Jan Rosenow has pointed out repeatedly that data centres are not the main driver of rising electricity demand. His posts drew a few hundred engagements. A single post claiming the opposite drew nearly 100,000.

AI minister Kanishka Narayan has launched a design award to encourage data centres that communities might actually like. It's a smart instinct, but it barely registered against the volume of criticism.

This is the industry's biggest communications gap. The facts that might reassure people – on water, on cooling, on energy sourcing, on community benefit – exist. They just aren't reaching the people who need to hear them, in the places where opinions are being formed.





AI Minister Kanishka Narayan consistently makes the data-centre case online.

Department for Science, Innovation & Technology / CC BY 4.0 / via Wikimedia Commons

Scotland: the frontline.

If you want to see where the UK debate is heading, look north.

Scotland has become the testing ground. Abundant renewables, cheap land and a government keen on inward investment have made it a magnet for hyperscale proposals. They have also made it the centre of the backlash.

There are now 24 proposals in the Scottish planning system. Together, they could demand around one and a half times the country's peak electricity use. On 16 September, Holyrood backed a Labour amendment saying no decisions should be made on AI data centre applications until the Scottish Government publishes national planning guidance, which ministers have promised by Christmas. A Green proposal for a full moratorium was rejected.

The Scottish debate has its own flavour. Opposition is wrapped up in land ownership, natural resources and national identity – who really benefits if Scotland hosts infrastructure owned and controlled from abroad? Bella Caledonia and campaigners like Lustra Skye have turned FOI requests, voting records and site-selection reports into a steady drumbeat of content for community groups.

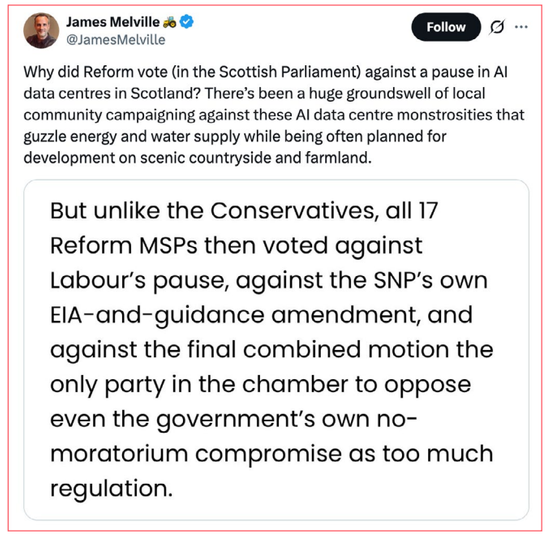
It isn't neatly partisan either. In February, Reform's economic plan promised to make data centres easier to build, with permitted development rights that would let many bypass full planning permission. In September, its MSPs voted against Holyrood's pause.

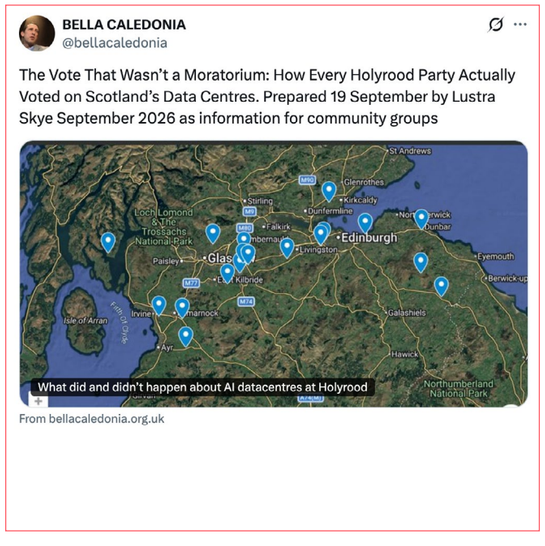
Then the backlash came from its own side. James Melville, a voice usually associated with the populist right, publicly asked why Reform had voted against a pause, given the "huge groundswell of local community campaigning". When the anti-establishment right turns on the anti-establishment party over your industry, the issue has escaped its usual boxes.

Then Reform changed tack. Within a week, Nigel Farage was in Edinburgh backing a pause. He described the scale of the proposals as "way beyond anyone's comprehension" and said he had been sympathetic until he saw the detailed plans. Days later, Kemi Badenoch went the other way, warning that Britain can't "end up falling behind".

What happens in Scotland ***won't stay*** in Scotland.

The arguments, tactics and campaign playbook are already being exported to Wales, to the Green Belt around London and to every council considering an AI Growth Zone.







Anatomy of a ***data centre backlash.***

The pattern is predictable. That's good news – if you're paying attention.

1

The ***application.***

A site is proposed, often on farmland or Green Belt, often by a company with little local presence.

2

The ***local spark.***

Residents set up a campaign. Objections pile up. Someone shares a photo of the field and a render of the building.

3

The ***amplifier.***

A national voice picks it up, adds a bigger frame – hypocrisy, foreign ownership, Big Tech greed, water – and sends it to hundreds of thousands of followers.

4

The ***moment.***

A drought, an energy price rise or a national announcement gives the story new urgency.

5

The ***politics.***

Local MPs and MSPs object. Motions are tabled. Questions are asked about subsidy, ownership and lobbying.

6

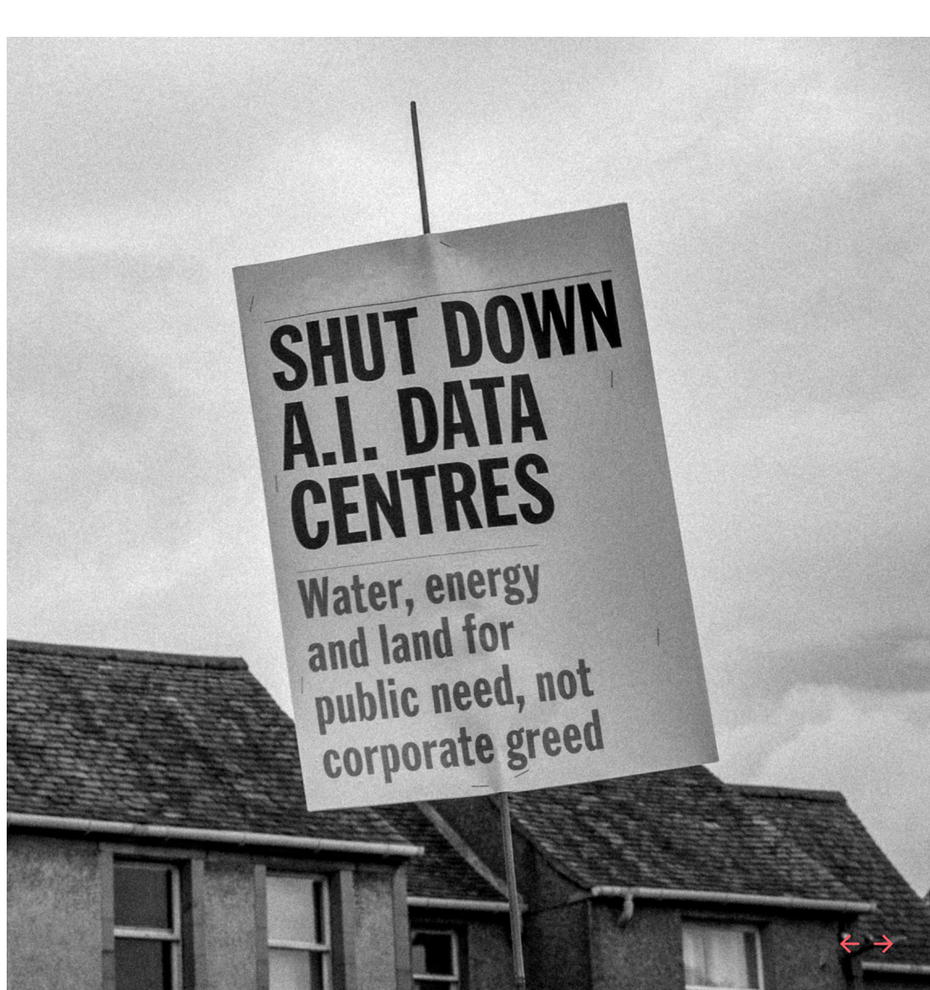
The ***mainstream.***

National media runs the story. The project becomes a case study in someone else's argument.

7

The ***verdict.***

Whatever the planning outcome, the company now has a reputation – and it isn't the one it chose.



What it *means* for ***developers.***

The biggest risk isn’t a single refusal. It’s being cast as another distant corporate interest consuming local resources for unclear public benefit.

Once that label sticks, every new application inherits it.



Here’s how to avoid it:

Get ahead on water.

It’s the issue with the most emotional power and the one where you have the strongest answers. Publish your water use, explain your cooling and do it before the next drought, not during it.

Fill the vacuum before someone else does.

Critics generate more than 90% of the engagement.

If you’re not telling your story online, others are telling it for you.

Answer “what’s in it for us?”

Jobs numbers alone won’t cut it. Think heat networks, skills, local energy, community ownership and investment people can see.

Show your workings.

The strongest attacks thrive on missing information. Be clear about who owns, operates and uses the site. Transparency is cheaper than suspicion.

Pick your ground carefully.

Brownfield beats farmland. Industrial beats scenic. A good site is the best communications strategy there is.

Don’t hide behind national priority.

“AI Growth Zone” and “nationally significant” don’t persuade a village. Relying on ministers to overrule councils may win the planning battle and lose the political war.

Talk to both sides.

This isn’t a left-or-right issue and no single party will solve it. Engage sceptics on both sides, not just the ministers who already agree with you.

Know who’s talking about you.

A handful of accounts drive most of the conversation. Know who they are, what they care about and how they frame the issue – before your site appears in their feed.

CAVENDISH

How Cavendish *can help.*

- **Social listening and monitoring.**
  Tracking the political voices shaping your sector online through Pulsr, with early warning when a story starts to move.
- **Digital reputation audit.**
  How your company, sites and sector are perceived across platforms, and who is driving it.
- **Stakeholder mapping and engagement.**
  Understanding the MPs, MSPs, councillors and campaigners around your sites, and how to engage them.
- **Community and campaign strategy.**
  Building local support, shaping the public benefit case and creating content that cuts through.
- **Crisis support.**
  Daily monitoring and on-call counsel when a site comes under fire.

Want to know what's being said about your projects?
Get in touch:

Contact *us*

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enquiries@cavendishconsulting.com