Dousing the Flames

How leaders can better navigate cultural change in 2020s Britain

More in Common

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ABOUT MORE IN COMMON

More in Common is an international initiative set up in 2017 to build societies and communities that are stronger, more united, and more resilient to the increasing threats of polarisation and social division. Our teams in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States work in partnership with a wide range of civil society groups, as well as philanthropy, business, faith, education, media, and government to connect people across lines of division.

More in Common
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Foreword

More in Common is publishing this paper because of our strong conviction that it is not in Britain's interest to be drawn into combustive, round-the-clock 'culture wars' debates, as is becoming commonplace in many other countries. But a convergence of self-interest and the clicks-and-eyeballs drivers of public debates in the 2020s is threatening to conspire against our national interest, and against the wishes of most Britons.

Culture wars debates consume a small minority of highly-engaged partisans, who ignite and feed the flames of conflict. But their effects are not contained to the small numbers who are engaged with them. They contribute to disinformation, by creating inaccurate and exaggerated perceptions of disagreements and divisions in society. They polarise societies, perpetuate conflict, reduce social trust, and distract the focus, time and resources of leaders across all sectors of society. In the long term, societies pay a heavy price as they become more absorbed in costly internal conflicts, and less focused on responding to changing external threats and opportunities.

The arsonists who ignite and fan the flames of the culture wars like to set the terms of these debates by framing complex issues in absolute 'us-versus-them' terms. They exaggerate the threat of the 'other side' and refuse to acknowledge the nuance and complexity that most people see in their everyday lives. More in Common convenes conversations with hundreds of people every month across the major democracies where we work, and in the United Kingdom we are consistently struck by the instinctively British trait of nuance and moderation. This is true even of many people who hold firm views on issues, yet who – especially once they feel that their opinion has been heard – are equally willing to recognise the validity of other points of view. The greatest threat to the culture wars arsonists is that our public debates acknowledge this nuance, because once debates recognise complexity, those flames begin to flicker.

This is not to say that there are no important issues or difficult disagreements in the debates that are often clustered together as 'culture wars'. These debates can touch on issues that are deeply important to many people – issues of fairness, justice, respect and dignity, and which shape our identity as individuals, as communities and as a nation. However, the incendiary nature of culture wars debates cannot do justice to the importance of these issues, and rarely moves things forward. Instead, these debates serve simply to keep highly-engaged groups in a state of continual combustion, while distracting the time and energy of leaders and institutions, and deepening public distrust and disengagement.

This paper aims to contrast the 'us-versus-them' culture wars debates with the way Britain has successfully learned to navigate differences and cultural change in the past. It seeks to provide insights into public attitudes that are often obscured by culture wars debates and simplistic opinion polls that frame debates only in binary terms. Leaders with diverse roles in our national life – including in media, politics, cultural institutions, faith, education, sports, entertainment and civil society – are finding themselves drawn into these conflicts, often unwittingly. Given people often interact with these institutions in daily life, these leaders can play a valuable role in moving the country forward from divisive culture wars debates to healthy and productive ways of managing cultural change.

This paper does not seek to duplicate the valuable analyses published recently by Kings Policy Institute, British Future, the Centre for Policy Studies or by Roger Hardman and Kirsty McNeill (among others). The picture that emerges from this analysis, and from More in Common's own large-scale mapping of the values and identity of the British public, Britain's Choice, is that the greatest differences in Britain are not between two warring tribes of 'woke' progressives versus patriotic conservatives. Instead, the more profound division is between a minority of highly-engaged activists on the right and left who are immersed in culture wars, and the much larger British public. The vast majority of Britons do not use terms like 'woke' or 'intersectionality' (or even 'culture wars') and feel distant from strident debates about statues, bathrooms, pronouns or whatever else has ignited the latest controversy. Building on that understanding, this paper seeks to understand what more our leaders can do to concretely tackle culture wars debates.

Chapter One goes behind the story of 'culture wars' to reflect on Britain's long history of navigating cultural change. It assesses the relevance of the culture war framing for the UK and considers the role that our leaders and institutions have to play in defusing conflict, and helping Britons to navigate differences and the ongoing process of culture change.

Chapter Two uses the findings of the Britain's Choice project to better understand how Britons think about cultural change and conflict. That survey of over 10,000 Britons found that far from Britain being split into two warring factions – akin to popular perceptions of polarised civic life in the United States – there are in fact seven distinct segments of the British public, who concur and disagree depending on the issue at hand. This analysis is supplemented with insights from a series of conversations conducted in June 2021 with focus groups with all seven population segments. This provides insights into Britons' attitudes to cultural flash points that were in the headlines at the time of those conversations, from England's football team taking the knee to removing pictures of the Queen in student common rooms. We also profile seven individuals who we met during those conversations, to highlight the rich nuances of their views on different social issues.

Chapter Three profiles three shifts in societal norms that have been successfully navigated in the UK in recent generations: advances in gender equality, acceptance of gay rights, and the consensus on climate change that has taken shape in recent years. These examples of cultural change have involved periods of conflict, but society has ultimately reached a widely-shared settlement on those issues. As examples of cultural change, they offer lessons as to how our leaders can better navigate the cultural conflicts of today. This chapter also profiles the work that schools and businesses specifically have played in navigating cultural change and their potentially powerful role in mitigating division.

Chapter Four draws together the opinion research and case studies of cultural change to offer insights for a solutions-oriented approach to cultural change. It sets out how leaders can better meet public expectations of navigating change rather than inflaming cultural conflict, with examples drawn from education, sport and business.

This paper is not a detailed prescription or manual for handling specific issues. Others are better placed to provide that guidance. Nor does it do full justice to the positive role that many institutions are already playing – we hope to showcase more such examples in the future. Instead, this paper is an initial, and humble, attempt to provide an alternative perspective on the culture wars in the UK, showing that we are more than capable of navigating cultural change without dividing the country and undermining trust and confidence in each other. It seeks to draw on current evidence and past experience to identify some distinctively British approaches to navigating change and advancing the common good.

Executive Summary

Like the iconic White Cliffs that mark the southern border of our country, Britain's cultural history is a story combining enduring certainties with constant change. The unchanging core is made up of distinctive national attributes that prize civility, good manners, and queuing; takes pride in our nation's history and national heroes; and feels a deep sense of connection to place, especially to the countryside of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. But other aspects of our culture are continually shifting – the fashion we wear, the food we cook, and the entertainment we consume – reflecting changes in technology, patterns of trade, movements of people, and geopolitical change.

> **I think we are culture. What we watch, what we do, how we spend our time – it's us.**
>
> *– Tanya, Backbone Conservative, London*

How we navigate our differences and disagreements matters. While cultural change has often heralded progress, it can just as often lead to uncertainty and insecurity, particularly as old certainties crumble and hierarchies fall away. Notwithstanding Britain's role in conflicts abroad, especially during the Imperial era, an important part of our national identity is having been unusually – although by no means entirely – successful in managing those changes, avoiding the more violent and destabilising upheavals seen elsewhere.

That has been in no small part a result of how leaders and institutions have navigated cultural change, especially in more recent times. We can learn from numerous positive examples where political and civil society leaders have stewarded change in a manner that has, usually, been peaceable rather than violent. It has involved participation in the processes of awareness-raising, dialogue, deliberation and compromise. That does not mean there has not been stubborn resistance to change, or times of vocal protest and demonstration against injustice. But as long ago as the Abolitionist movement in the early 19th century, successful reformist movements have often been big tents that have actively sought to bring people with them. Cultural change in Britain has also been stewarded by institutions: by our schools, helping both to instil a sense of British history and introduce young people to new people and concepts; by businesses, whose workplaces have brought together people from different walks of life, and whose leaders have taken a stand against injustices; by national institutions, from the BBC to museums who help shape our shared identity; and by leaders in the arts, faith and academia.

While there have been moments of cultural conflict in past decades, periods of escalating conflict have typically been followed by de-escalation, compromise and settlement. More recently, disagreements over issues of culture, values, and identity have begun to feel more polarised, and society more divided. The transformation of our information environment by digital technology and social media platforms has intensified the speed and volume of debate, creating the perception of constant conflict and deepening divisions. Emerging from the Brexit debate in 2020, one in two Britons felt that the country has never felt

so divided[1]. This environment has also seen the emergence of an industry of conflict entrepreneurs in politics, media, tech, and elsewhere, who profit from division and conflict. Some prey on uncertainty and insecurity for electoral gain; some incite conflict to rally small bases of elites and activists; some seek financial gain. Others reluctantly join the conflict entrepreneurs because they see no alternative paths to getting ahead. Together, they seek to replicate the 'culture wars' seen in the United States and elsewhere, aiming to turn the divisions of the Brexit era into enduring fault lines across Britain.

> **It's kind of like, my opinion sticks and yours is wrong... it's kind of like, it's my way or nothing at all. We don't really listen much to the other person enough - that's one of our problems. It's like someone has to be wrong. You can't meet in the middle, or you can't form a truce.**
>
> *– Owen, Civic Pragmatist, Manchester*

These cultural conflicts generate far more heat than light, and only occasionally touch on the issues of greatest importance to people's everyday lives. Nonetheless, they pose a challenge to those in leadership roles. Some see that challenge as an opportunity to seek short-term advantage, especially if they feel answerable to only one side of cultural differences. Others, especially those in less political roles who answer to a more diverse cross-section of Britons, seek to avoid the minefield of cultural conflict. However, in so doing they abrogate any responsibility for navigating cultural change – often leaving the field to be dominated by the most strident and least responsible voices.

Both approaches let Britons down. The culture wars arsonists who seek to exploit cultural change to create stark us-versus-them divisions make it harder for Britain to navigate change. But their efforts to stoke division will only be more successful if more responsible leaders do not step up to reset the narrative and help the country navigate change more effectively. We do not lack for past examples that can inform us on how to navigate change on issues that in their time seemed intractable yet today are widely accepted (if not fully realised), such as gender equality and gay rights.

Most people in Britain view culture and change very differently from those who feed the flames of the culture wars. Far from being divided into two opposing sides on issues of culture and identity, More in Common's research has found that Britons cluster around seven different population segments. Those seven segments agree and diverge depending on the issues at hand. But more importantly, in new research conducted for this report, we find a surprising amount of common ground and, among most people, a desire to balance competing views and concerns – even on the supposed cultural 'flashpoints':

- On matters of **history and heritage**, Britons want to hear a fuller set of facts. They do not hanker for a sanitised view of British history told as stories of heroes and villains. They understand the need for nuance, and that what we celebrate in the public square today needs to reflect both our heritage and contemporary attitudes. While similar numbers of people take either side of binary opinion poll questions about whether protestors should be able to tear statues down, in an open discussion public views are much more nuanced. People are more comfortable with plans to move statues of slave traders to more appropriate

1 Juan-Torres, M., Dixon, T., Kimaram, A. (2020): Britain⊠s Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain. More in Common.

locations such as museums, an approach that – with responsible leadership – could satisfy the concerns of most on both sides of that debate. Most Britons recognise nuance on these issues – for example, they find the idea of tearing down a statue of Churchill ridiculous and see him as a national hero. At the same time, they can understand why a US President might choose not to display Churchill's bust in the Oval Office.

If we erase that, if we erase the key players and don't educate people of the horrors and the tragedies and the misjustice empire, colonisation and slave trade caused, we will repeat them same mistakes. So, we have got to show history, there's more to know

– Graham, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside

– On issues of **free speech and 'cancel culture'**, most Britons believe that free expression is important, and part of our national culture. However, they do not see unrestricted free speech as some kind of unimpeachable constitutional right. They also believe in the importance of politeness, respect, and not deliberately giving offence to others. They view the ability to speak your mind, to ask questions, and to occasionally make mistakes as integral to how cultural change takes place – with just about everyone able to reflect on how their own views are different from those of their parents' or grandparents' generation. Britons think there should be consequences for inciting hatred towards others, but they also think that motive is important, and that many people are too willing to take offence and criticise them for using the wrong words and phrases. Even many who want to avoid offence towards others feel nervous that they will trip up and be misunderstood, and they feel we need a culture that is more tolerant of mistakes.

I think there's that thin line between freedom of speech where you can just say anything, and then there's just being offended by everything. Because I always think somebody somewhere is going to be offended by something you say at some point, but it doesn't mean you don't have to say it...I think my most disliked word at the moment is when people refer to stuff as banter. And it's just an excuse for being an absolute dick to somebody, but you can get away with it if you say it's banter. And I think, no, you're just being a dick and you're being offensive, and deliberately offensive. But as long as you say LOL at the end, or say it's just bants.

– Nigel, Loyal National, Manchester

– On issues of **diversity and 'wokeism'**, Britons are proud of the changes that have seen our country become a fairer, more equal, and more tolerant place. Across segments from Progressive Activists to Loyal Nationals, Britons speak confidently about the positive advances made on gay equality. They single out the positive role of schools in helping to introduce young people to different ideas and concepts. There is more scepticism about workplace diversity training and efforts, which some people worry is overly tokenistic (often taking place in a single half day) and can be presented as shutting down debate rather than creating spaces for open discussion and learning about difference.

If you've got a problem with it, you can just correct us. There's no need to get super offended if we get something wrong. Everyone makes mistakes. I think it's better just to help people learn rather than hating on people for no reason. Because it's really unproductive.

– Weronika, Loyal National, Stoke

Across all these issues, the conversations convened by More in Common suggest that often the greatest source of conflict is not differences in opinion on specific issues, but our approach as a society in how we navigate those differences. While people understand the need to retain and explain, for example, they are more divided on protestors pulling down statues because the process feels chaotic and disorderly. While they place a premium on civility and not causing offence, many feel that changes that they do not understand are being forced upon them. There are too few spaces to discuss issues involving cultural that allow people to ask questions about others' experiences, express their opinions, and sometimes get things wrong. People feel that others are quick to judge and condemn. Most recognise the need to embrace change, and for society more broadly to evolve over time, but they feel that change should be balanced, enduring, and meaningful. There is, for example, scepticism that activists fight over symbolism at the expense of substantive change.

I genuinely think they should be [leading on] this, but the problem is politicians now just want soundbites. They just want to be seen to be sending out the right tweet. There's no substance behind it. They don't give a monkey's, and everyone knows that they don't care.

– Becca, Civic Pragmatist, Brighton

Britons believe that **their leaders should lead on how we navigate change.** Part of why the public feels let down by political leaders is that they are failing to steward change well. In our conversations with people across different population segments, we found people responding similarly to the firestorm of debate ignited by reports of a group of Oxford students taking down a picture of the Queen in their student common room. Almost all thought that the students' decision was wrong and ultimately pointless, but they were equally baffled that the sorts of normal student excesses seen for generations should make front-page news, or command a commentary from the Education Secretary. As one Backbone Conservative put it, a leader with serious responsibilities shouldn't be focused on giving out inflammatory quotes, but on "trying to get the kids through school".

Yeah, politicians are hugely influential characters. They change people's opinions...They have a huge responsibility about what they say, and rarely, very rarely, it's anything positive or something that's constructive for society. It's usually divisive.

– Owen, Civic Pragmatist, Manchester

Others are also frustrated with a lack of leadership from those who abdicate their responsibility to help navigate cultural change and allow extreme voices to dominate debates. Britons look up to the national institutions that bring people together. They want local leaders, such as head teachers and leaders

of community organisations, to get involved and help navigate culture change in a sensitive way that unites rather than divides. They want those with large followings – footballers and other celebrities, to play their part in navigating our differences too. Britons expect our leaders to stand up and be counted so that we can navigate differences in more positive ways – and they are tired of the dominance of extreme voices and those who exploit differences to deepen our divisions.

Recommendations

Seven key insights emerge from these conversations about the positive role of leadership in helping British society navigate change and avoid culture wars:

Do not accept the way that debates are often framed in shorthand reporting of culture wars. Instead, assume greater complexity in what people believe. Most Britons have a sense of pride in the cultural change that has taken place in their lifetimes and that has resulted in greater equality, tolerance, and respect for women and for people who belong to minority groups. At the same time, most Britons also share a sense of pride in our culture, identity, and heritage. It is not inevitable that a majority of Britons will develop 'stacked identities' where large groups of people adhere to tribal patterns of belief and behaviours, as happens in countries subjected to years of culture wars. People in the UK rarely divide into two starkly opposed sides on cultural issues, and most people do not think about issues through a chiefly political lens.

Recognise the need for more space for people to discuss, question, and even challenge change. As a society we can avoid unnecessary conflict if people feel that they can ask "silly questions" and have had their say on issues of cultural differences. Open but respectful conversations are more likely to change people's views than confrontation. The perceived silencing of questions or opinions can be polarising, because it can lead people with honest questions or misunderstandings to feeling shamed or silenced – emotions that can be exploited by others who want to inflame conflict. Educational institutions (schools especially) have an important role to play in encouraging a culture of civil debate, enquiry, and mutual respect

Insights in practice

Special attention should be paid to managing differences between generations, especially the high expectations that many younger people have about the values and understanding of older generations. While much of the debate focuses on universities, that assumes that the 50 per cent of young people who do not attend university have less of stake in these debates. Age 18 is far too late to encourage a culture of civil debate. As part of preparing young people to succeed in modern Britain, schools should have zero tolerance for bullying and encourage respect for difference but should also take their role seriously in encouraging a culture of debate and discussion. They should make sure parents feel aware and consulted about teaching in culturally sensitive areas, but also be clear that the loudest voices do not have a veto.

Focus contributions to debates less on responding to the voices and arguments of small groups who dominate social media and polarise debates. Instead, leaders should focus on reinforcing an accurate reflection of reality. While those who drive conflict should be held accountable for actions of intolerance and bigotry, leaders should avoid elevating and amplifying the status of very small groups of people with extreme views. Cultural arsonists thrive on provocation when it is often far better to showcase the views of a more tolerant, compassionate majority.

In communicating about issues of difference and cultural change, use language that is concrete and accessible, in preference to the abstract and conceptual political language that dominates debates on social media, full of jargon and insider terminology. This can help address the sense of alienation and exclusion between ordinary people and the elites who drive the culture wars debates. Persuasion, advocacy, and campaigning efforts will be more effective if they make their case in a way that creates a big tent for people with different views.

Focus on tangible actions rather than symbolism or fights about words. While most people are happy to support public acts of solidarity such as clapping for carers and taking the knee to stand against racism, and do not want to cause offence with the words they use, most people want to see symbolism matched with action. Businesses have an important role to play in ensuring that their commitment to diversity is not simply expressed through one-off diversity training or branding products.

Establish inclusive processes that allow us to successfully navigate cultural flashpoints. Conflict can be de-escalated through creating processes that allow for people to express concerns, for new voices to be brought in, for fact-finding, and for finding solutions. The design of these processes should harness valuable insights from conflict resolution. A wide range of people should be able to have their say, while also preventing the escalation of conflict and overreaction to intentional provocations. They should identify common ground and practical solutions. Critically, these processes need to be conducted in ways that build public confidence.

Insights in practice

We recommend that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Government Equalities Office should appoint expert panels to find practical, common ground approaches that can defuse conflict around flashpoint issues. These panels should genuinely reflect the diversity of opinion on the issues under consideration. In order to avoid the perceptions of bias that have undermined previous commissions their members should be appointed on a cross party basis and should take evidence from a broad cross-section of society. Their deliberations should be independent of Government and accessible to the public.

Tech giants must do more than window-dressing to address the negative effects of their platforms and the environment of disinformation and divisiveness that they have helped create. The public holds them accountable, alongside politicians, for the increased divisiveness of recent years, and see them as irresponsible and profit driven. Their segregating and lack of accountability actively fuel cultural conflict. Unless they address the way that their platforms elevate hate, abuse and division, public support for regulation and more punitive measures will only intensify.

Conclusion

Leaders face three choices in responding to ‘culture wars’ debates:

- They can align with cultural arsonists in inflaming conflicts, seeking short-term gain often at the expense of cohesion and real progress.
- They can stick their head in the sand and hope that the culture wars simply pass them by, avoiding responsibility but allowing extreme voices to continue shaping national debates.
- Alternatively, they can recognise a responsibility and opportunity for leadership, to help Britain navigate cultural change, and play their part in the latest chapter of shaping Britain’s culture, building on the past and adapting for the future.

I have a responsibility to the wider community to use my voice, and so do the players.

– From ‘Dear England’, a letter from England football manager Gareth Southgate in June 2021, reflecting on the England football team’s role in our nation’s story

As Britain confronts the risk of a vicious cycle of cultural conflicts, the ‘players’ extend far beyond sports teams, or politicians, campaigners, and media commentators. The institutions that Britons come into contact with in their daily lives are especially important players today. If Britain is to avoid perpetual culture wars, and be true to the British traits of nuance and balance, more leaders need to step up and lead.

One of the reasons for the exhaustion with conflict shared across political divides is that the British public is losing confidence in our society’s ability to manage differences and disagreements. They look abroad, especially to the United States, and fear that similar divisions could emerge here. There are many reasons to believe that will not happen, but key to avoiding deepening divisions is re-establishing public confidence in our ability to navigate the process of cultural change. This is, fundamentally, a challenge for leaders. It is not easily done, but it is fundamentally important for our future. One of the most important tests of leadership in the 2020s is the ability to navigate flashpoints and differences, and move people beyond 'us-versus-them' to a stronger sense of common purpose and mutual trust. The goal of this paper is to help call forth the kind of leadership Britain needs to navigate our future.

King George V statue, Trafalgar Square, 2020
Hulki Okan Tabak / Unsplash

Chapter 1
How Britain navigates cultural change

The White Cliffs of Dover are one of the most iconic images of Britain, forming a reference point recognisable not just here in the UK, but around the world.

The Cliffs themselves have been formed and reformed over millions of years. Sometimes that process has been particularly dramatic; other times it has been a result of the incremental eroding forces of wind and rain. The result is that the cliffs guarding the channel that we see today are both the same and yet different from what our ancestors saw at other points in history.

In that respect, the White Cliffs of Dover are like much of British identity and culture: at once enduring and deeply rooted in our national heritage, while also changing, sometimes quickly, sometimes gradually.

Auld Lang Syne, the love of the game, a penchant for queuing, dry British humour, or passion for the great British countryside - in these and many other respects, British culture draws on a common thread from the last century to this one. In other areas, of course, modern British culture would be unrecognisable to the Britons of a century ago. Part of that change reflects technological and scientific advancement, part the mishmash of culture we have imported from a more globalised world, but perhaps most significantly it reflects a change in attitudes on a series of major social issues – from religious freedom to gender equality to gay rights. The culture of 2020s Britain is undoubtedly more open and tolerant than a century ago.

I think we've become more socially liberal.... I think my neighbour, he's a gay gentleman, and I think he is 70 something, and we talk all the time about, in his lifetime, it was illegal to love another man, it's insane. When my grandma first came over from Jamaica, there were signs in doors saying, 'no blacks, no Irish, no dogs' So, things have changed.

– Emily, Disengaged Battler, Leeds

Yeah definitely [things have changed for the better]. Multiculturalism, to me. My partner is of Indian descent. Even within my own family. In the early 90s, I would probably be blackballed for that, even in my family.

– Graham, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside

As with that process of shaping the White Cliffs – those cultural changes have sometimes been dramatic. The belated advent of women's suffrage, the post-war establishment of the Welfare State, the Jenkin reforms, the arrival of the Windrush Generation or the Blair and Cameron Government's legislation for gay equality. Other times though cultural change has been quieter, seeping into Britons lives in a softer more personal way, through work and colleagues; or schools and universities; and even TV shows and music. The point is that cultural change in Britain is constant, even if it is not always visible or audible. Undoubtedly, that change, sometimes, happens too slowly for some and too fast for others, but for the most part Britons have taken cultural change in their stride.

Society can cope with people. It's done so for thousands of years. And when people want to try and bring about accelerated change, I'm inclined to think that kind of backfires. So actually, just allow people to be people.

– Claude, Loyal National, Brighton

That's changed a lot since I was in Catholic school, it never was like that before. We weren't allowed to know anything about gays. There was no gays, there were no lesbians, there were no bisexuals, there were no transgender people.

– Anita, Loyal National, Bristol

Britain's leaders have played a central role in guiding that process of acceptance, acting as stewards of cultural change in Britain. Governments of right and left have at times ushered in social change and at other times resisted progressive excess. And alongside politicians, many campaigners for social justice have built big tent coalitions that worked to change hearts and minds on issues of equality and freedom.

But stewards of cultural change go beyond the world of campaigning and politics. Britain's schools have worked to help young people understand those who are different to them, while at the same time instilling an important sense of British identity and values. Britain's workplaces have long been melting pots for people with a range of backgrounds and life experiences, and businesses themselves have taken the lead in showcasing their values. Cultural change has been stewarded through places of worship, the entertainment industry and, of course, through national sports teams. The English football team has in recent years found ways to address cultural issues that resonate far more widely than any politician's speech or campaigner's placard.

Well, TV is sort of bringing the problem or whatever it is into your living room. So you engage with it by choice, and if it's well presented, well-acted, well scripted, you go along with it. You're drawn in in a different way than you might be from going to a physical rally.

– Gavin, Civic Pragmatist, London

We've made some movement, especially as a black man, as a family man with mixed race children, as a black man, who's most of my friends are white British, to be honest....For me that says a lot, the fact that we can have these conversations about racism...I've been invited by the headmistress at my son's school to be on a panel and stuff like that.

– Peter, Established Liberal, Brighton

As a result, notwithstanding Britain's role in conflicts abroad – especially during the imperial era – Britain has often avoided the violent domestic upheavals seen in other countries. Most of the iconic British protest movements have been largely peaceful, especially compared to those that take place on the Continent. Of course, this has not always been the case – from the Toxeth to Tonypandy to Tottenham, tensions have occasionally spilled out in more explosive ways. But what's striking is how few these examples are.

Even when debates over cultural change have been more fraught, Britain has quickly settled back into de-escalation, compromise, and settlement. This is a testament to both the British public, but also the way that leaders and institutions played their role in articulating and mediating cultural differences.

Has something changed in recent years? Some suggest that the Brexit referendum marked a turning point in Britain's approach to cultural change, with moderation replaced by bellicosity. Others have pointed to a backlash against the status quo, driven by an accumulation of grievances: the legacy of the financial crisis, the impact of austerity, stagnating incomes, free movement, and left-behind communities.

It's different factions of culture now. Where, "I agree with this. I don't agree with that." Where do we go?

– Tommy, Loyal National, Stoke

Commentators have embraced the idea that Britain is now in the midst of a wave of 'culture wars'. Research for the Policy Institute at Kings College London shows a recent surge in newspaper articles and opinion pieces examining the nature and existence of culture wars – a twenty-five-fold increase since 2015.[2]

There is however little evidence to suggest that these 'wars' are the result of a change in public attitudes. Instead, most analysis shows that they are largely driven by small numbers of people on the right and left. These culture war arsonists use the echo chambers of social media and the column pages of broadsheet newspapers to stoke outrage. Unlike effective campaigners and advocates, they are less interested in persuading the undecided than winning approval from their tribe and exploiting opportunities to stoke further conflict.

When faced with these provocateurs, leaders often face a choice between burying their head in the sand, or taking a stance against polarisation to help create the space to wrestle with complex issues in a way that informs and educates, rather than inflames.

Some leaders clearly see benefits in fanning the flames of conflict. For politicians, it can help them rally their base and demonstrate their strength against opponents; for journalists, it makes for good copy, and for campaigning organisations, it can help rally supporters and raise funds. But these actors underestimate the harm that widening conflicts do to our social fabric. What's more, even for the protagonists, the benefits of culture wars may not be quite as clear-cut as they think – as evidence in this report highlights.

I think the only people benefiting from these conflicts is those newspapers. Just because they've got more articles to write, more headlines to write, so more money for them.

– Weronika, Loyal National, Stoke

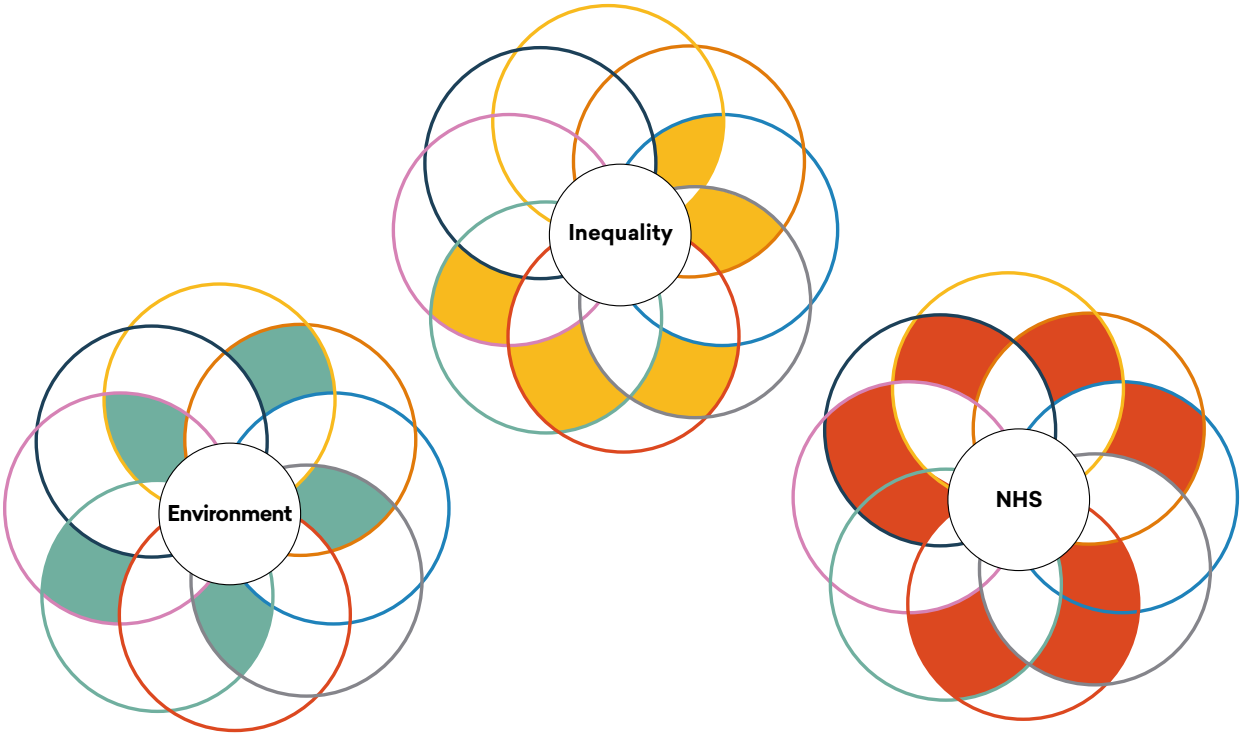
On the other hand, some leaders are tempted to wish the conflict away. Recent years have seen head teachers face protests for teaching about same-sex relationships, businesses facing boycotts for taking stances on social issues, national institutions attacked for 'retain and explain' policies, and musicians and artists stepping back from public life after stumbling into a social media firestorm. It is no surprise that leaders are often keen to sidestep public debates entirely.

2 "Culture wars" in the UK, The Policy Institute, Kings College London, June 2021 - https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-055

That helps explain why some workplaces have gone so far as to ban discussion of politics and social issues entirely, and others have outsourced organisational positions and policies to the loudest voices – be they conservative parents or activist minded younger staff. But ignoring the flames lapping at the feet of our national discourse simply allows those flames to spread. Rather than retreating from cultural debate, leaders need to help society to manage change – not just because it is the right thing to do, but because managing change well can make workplaces and schools more harmonious and productive, societies less fractured, and discourse less fraught. More in Common's research finds that Britons are ready to embrace leaders who step up to help douse the flames of the culture wars, and help us recover our tradition of successfully navigating change. This capability may indeed become a defining trait of our greatest leaders in the 2020s.

Britons and the culture wars

People in Britain value their identity and culture. Britain's Choice, one of the largest studies of social psychology ever conducted in the UK, finds that four in five Britons have great pride in our nation's history. How culture evolves and adapts matters to them. But rather than splitting into two opposing camps on cultural issues, Britons divide and unite in different formations depending on the issue at hand – much like how the pieces of a kaleidoscope cluster and separate as it rotates around.



Britain's Choice also finds little appetite on the part of the British public to become culture war antagonists. Far from welcoming conflict, 60 per cent of Britons say that they feel exhausted by division in politics. The Policy Institute research also highlights the extent to which culture wars are largely an elite pastime – most Britons have a limited awareness of what the phrase means or what these wars are about. That is because culture wars are in large part an American concept, and one that cultural arsonists are trying to retrofit awkwardly to the British setting.

The 'culture wars' term, coined by American sociologist James Hunter in the 1990s, describes a conflict between two irreconcilable worldviews over national identity and where lines are drawn between right and wrong.[3] It is a conflict that cuts deeper than disagreement. Britain's Choice shows that while there are significant fault lines and a deepening sense of division, British society is far from being divided into two irreconcilable and opposing sides. The reality is far more nuanced. People's views on one flashpoint issue are often a poor guide to what they think about others. Politics is also less central to people's lives – just one in three Britons feels that supporting a political party is important to them – compared to two-thirds of Americans.

More in Common is planning future work to provide deeper insights into the similarities and differences between Britons and Americans, given the extent to which politicians, activists, and commentators in the UK are influenced by trends in the US. A comparison of the findings of the Britain's Choice and Hidden Tribes reports,[4] which apply similar approaches to mapping the values of both countries, highlights some similar trends. While the UK feels more divided than in the past, the opposing sides in cultural conflict are less clearly defined, and feelings towards the other side are far less hostile than in the US. On substantive issues, we frequently find larger gaps between the most progressive and most conservative group in the US. In Britain, 39 per cent of Backbone Conservatives say that white privilege exists – more than twice the number of Devoted Conservatives in the US (18 per cent). In addition, the views of different population segments on flashpoint issues move around far more in the UK – the segment with the highest level of concern about political correctness in the UK is not Backbone Conservatives but Loyal Nationals (at 90 per cent); and yet they are also the group most likely to support a bigger role for government post-Covid and stricter rules to protect the environment than the other segments.

While people in both the US and UK feel far more divided than in the past, their experiences are distinct. Leaders in politics, media, and civil society should not approach culture change as though we are in the United States. Identity and culture are important to Britons, but most do not think of these disagreements as a part of a larger societal conflict, in the way that highly engaged elites such as politicians, commentators, and activists do. Across different population segments, many are critical of the way that leaders either inflame these disagreements, or abdicate responsibility for helping society navigate them.

They can just put petrol on the fire and make it worse. And so many of them are not incredibly intelligent and think of only the political side, not how it actually affects the person.

– Gavin, Civic Pragmatist, London

Yeah, politicians are hugely influential characters. They change people's opinions...They have a huge responsibility about what they say, and rarely, very rarely, it's anything positive or something that's constructive for society. It's usually divisive.

– Owen, Civic Pragmatist, Manchester

3 Davison Hunter, J. (1991). Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America. New York: Basic Books. p34

4 Stephen Hawkins et al (2018), Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarization, More in Common

Britons feel let down by the fact that political leaders have not been navigating culture change in a way that brings people together and moves the country forward. Across all segments, including those more likely to have voted Conservative in the 2019 General Election, many feel that politicians and other leaders are failing to lead. They feel frustrated that on complex issues, political leaders only turn up when it suits them, are too interested in soundbites, and do not live up to the serious responsibilities of their offices. These frustrations are not limited to politicians. Many also criticise activists and campaigners for not giving people the time or space to understand and discuss difficult cultural issues. Likewise, some mention that when workplaces, schools and other institutions respond to culture change, they do not take enough time to understand people's starting points. Many also feel intimidated because they are not up to speed with new words that others are using, and they are fearful of saying something that might unintentionally cause offence or make themselves look stupid.

Like the Extinction Rebellion ones. They had a lot of goodwill at first but then when they stopped people getting to work, it didn't go down so well, did it? People just lost their patience with it

– Emily, Disengaged Battler, Leeds

Absolutely. Well, [when expressing an opinion on a sensitive issue], we're afraid to lose our jobs aren't we?

– Peter, Established Liberal, Brighton

Yet recent decades furnish examples of leaders helping to navigate cultural change successfully. A concerted effort across many institutions has seen the representation of women on FTSE 350 boards almost triple in the past decade.[5] Faith schools have found ways to talk about diversity and identity by drawing parallels between religious and sexual minorities. England's diverse young football team has modelled skill, teamwork, and solidarity in embracing an inclusive vision of Englishness, striking a chord in a way that is defining for a whole generation.

Common to the successful navigation of change by leaders is an appreciation that **for people in Britain, *how* change happens is often as important as the change itself.** In the conversations about cultural change that we have convened, a common theme is that Britons do not want to be harangued or browbeaten about their attitudes, but want the time and space to understand. Many are unfamiliar with the details of debates that are debated extensively by highly-engaged groups. Freedom of expression is important to most Britons – not because of some abstract type of First Amendment absolutism, but because they think it is important to be able to openly discuss the type of country we want to be, and to learn by asking questions and sometimes making mistakes. The fear of being silenced because of overly zealous activists or nervous institutions is widely shared. When this happens, people can feel unheard or humiliated, and pushed into the position of opposing changes that they were questioning, rather than resisting. Social trust and capital can be eroded because people feel that change is something that happens *to them* rather than *with them*, and conflict seems the only way to resist it.

5 The proportion rose from 12.5 per cent in 2011 to 34.3 per cent in 2021: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-changing-face-of-business-number-of-women-on-ftse-boards-up-by-50-in-just-5-years

Allow people to express their opinion, and then I'm always changing my mind about stuff. My kids will come up to me and say, 'Dad, what about X, Y, Z?' And I go, 'No, actually, it's a good point'. As long as someone puts their argument or point across in a nice, polite, respectful way ... we need to listen to people's opinions. It's how the world works, it's how change happens.

– Stu, Progressive Activist, Bristol

I think we're a conservative nation. We are polite. We do queue up; a lot European countries don't queue up. It's how we are. It's how we are. We don't shout out. We don't take to the streets like the French do after Bastille. They take to the streets; they'll take to the waters. We don't do anything like that. No, we're very, very placid.

– Tommy, Loyal National, Stoke

You still got that fundamental right to voice your opinion, whether it's right wrong, informed, ignorant, you are allowed to be who you are and voice what you think.

– Graham, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside

The task of forward-looking leadership is to meet Britons on their own terms, and provide the kind of leadership that helps society navigate disagreements and move forward together. Leaders need to focus less on playing to their base, and more on demonstrating the kind of leadership that embraces the necessity of change but does so in a way that is open, confident, and true to who we are and the type of country we want to be.

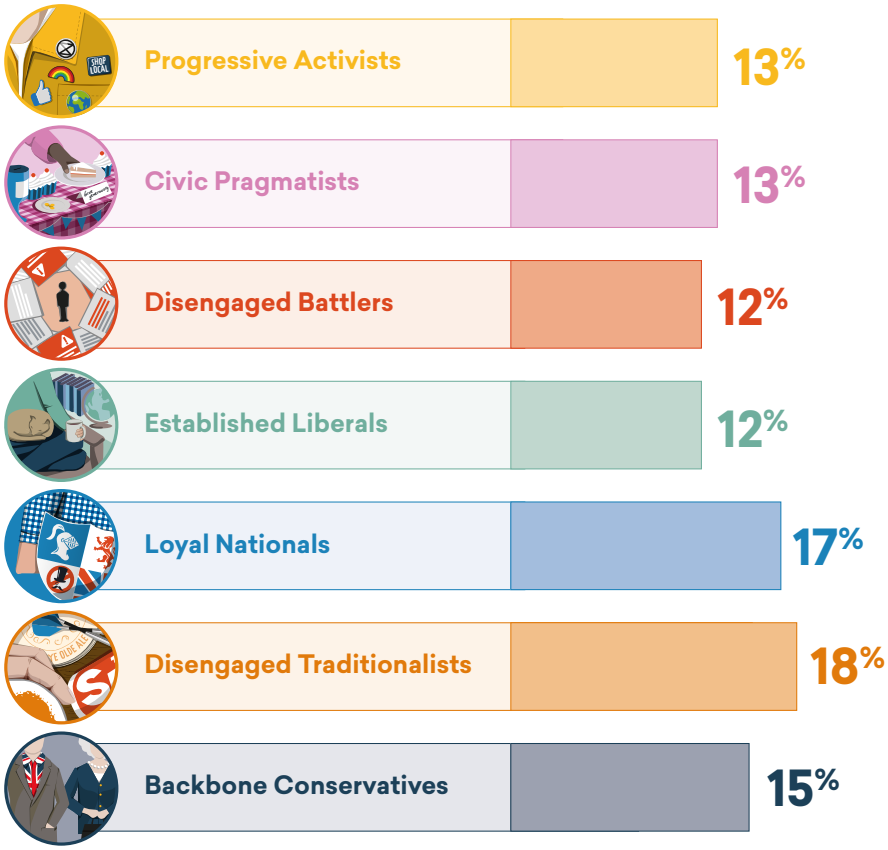
Black Lives Matter protest, Parliament Square, June 2020
James Eades / Unsplash

Chapter 2
How Britons navigate cultural change

2.1 Unity and division

Two-thirds of Britons say that the country feels divided. But an even larger number believe that we have more in common than what divides us.[6] While Britain remains vulnerable to the forces that divide us, our differences are too often overstated, and our common ground underestimated.

More in Common has worked with data scientists and social psychology researchers to build a model that maps the British population not according to their party, age, income or other demographic factor, but according to their values and core beliefs. Analysing a representative sample of more than 10,000 people in partnership with YouGov, and conducting focus group conversations and one-on-one interviews with more than 200 Britons, we have identified seven distinct population groups – the 'British Seven'. Hundreds of organisations in different sectors are using this mapping to inform their strategies, and we likewise believe that this segmentation of the British population can provide unique insights on how leaders can navigate cultural change.



6 In response to the question, "How united or divided does the UK feel to you these days?" in February 2021, 65 per cent of respondents said divided. In response to the question, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'People in the UK have more in common than what divides us.'", 74 per cent agreed. Research fielded by YouGov and More in Common, N=2,378.

The Britain's Choice report explain the segments in detail, but following is a synopsis of the distinguishing characteristics of the British Seven:

- **Progressive Activists**: A passionate and vocal group for whom politics is at the core of their identity, and who seek to correct the historic marginalisation of groups based on their race, gender, sexuality, wealth, and other forms of privilege. They are politically engaged, critical, opinionated, frustrated, cosmopolitan, and environmentally conscious.
- **Civic Pragmatists:** A group that cares about others, at home or abroad, and who are turned off by the divisiveness of politics. They are charitable, concerned, exhausted, community-minded, open to compromise, and socially liberal.
- **Disengaged Battlers:** A group that feels that they are just keeping their heads above water, and who blame the system for its unfairness. They are tolerant, insecure, disillusioned, disconnected, overlooked, and socially liberal.
- **Established Liberals:** A group that has done well and means well towards others, but also sees a lot of good in the status quo. They are comfortable, privileged, cosmopolitan, trusting, confident, and pro-market.
- **Loyal Nationals:** A group that is anxious about the threats facing Britain and facing themselves. They are proud, patriotic, tribal, protective, threatened, aggrieved, and frustrated about the gap between the haves and the have-nots.
- **Disengaged Traditionalists:** A group that values a well-ordered society, takes pride in hard work, and wants strong leadership that keeps people in line. They are self-reliant, ordered, patriotic, tough-minded, suspicious, and disconnected.
- **Backbone Conservatives:** A group who are proud of their country, optimistic about Britain's future outside of Europe, and who keenly follow the news, mostly via traditional media sources. They are nostalgic, patriotic, stalwart, proud, secure, confident, and relatively engaged with politics.

Through the lens of the British Seven, we can more easily see how Britons handle cultural change and the areas on which people start from shared set of values and national pride.

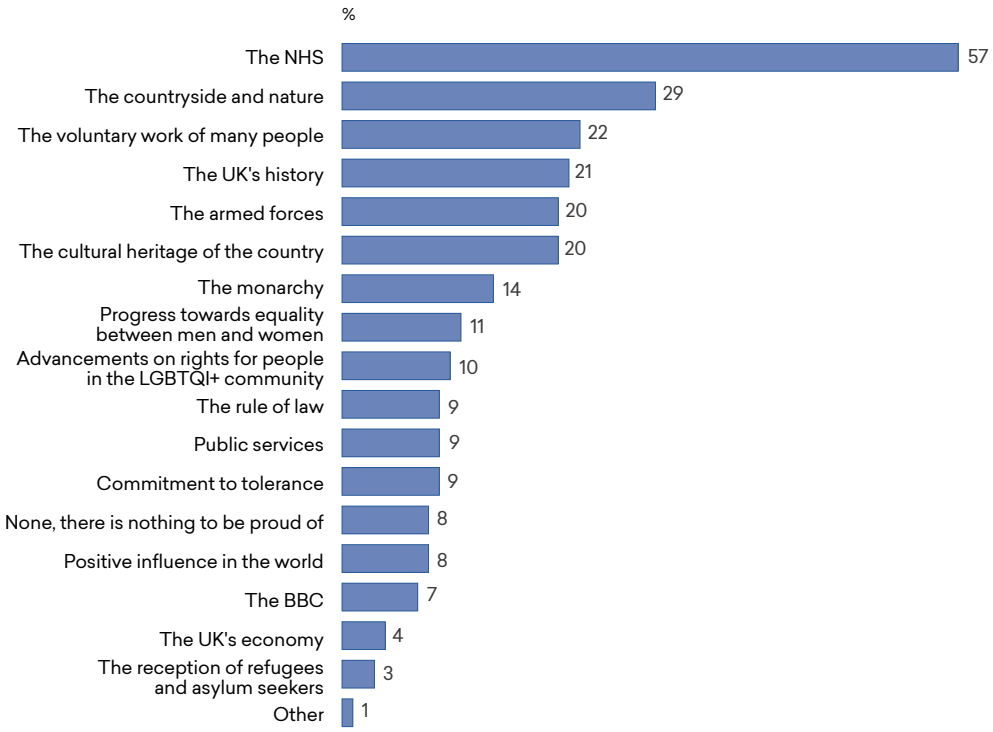
When asked what makes them proud of the UK today, Britons across all seven groups express strong pride in the NHS, the British countryside and nature, and our voluntary traditions.

Figure 1

Pride in the UK

Britons share a strong sense of pride in the NHS, along with the countryside and the tradition of voluntary work in the country

What are you most proud of in the UK today?



Qu. What are you proud of in the UK today? Select up to 3. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

When describing their ideal UK, Britons use the following values:

These shared sources of national pride provide a good starting point that is often missed in the culture wars commentary, which assumes we are a country riven down the middle. In fact, the level of agreement the public has on both which issues are most important to them and the locus of their national pride undercut the narrative of culture war.

For most Britons, the notion of culture wars is a distant proposition. Only one in three Britons consider the political party they support to be an important part of their identity. Only one in five think the Leave-Remain divide is the 'greatest divide' in Britain today[7] – something not reflected in the framing of a country still irrevocably split between the 48 per cent and the 52 per cent. Leaders can more effectively engage the public when they recognise this and talk about cultural change in human, practical, and concrete terms – rather than highly political terms. Most people in Britain have low levels of engagement with day-to-day political debates – they have other priorities from family to work to personal life. They take their cultural cues not from politics or campaigners, but from their places of work, worship or education, the sports teams they follow or their favourite soaps. Because of this influence, these organisations and institutions have a critical role in helping to steward cultural change.

Cultural change is likewise often framed in ways that obscure, rather than reveal, public opinion. While in the past cultural warriors would have used class identities as a way of dividing people, they now adopt other divides such as 'red/blue wall', 'metropolitan elite/white working class', and 'remainer/leaver'. Disagreements on cultural issues are more strongly predicted by age and education than these divisions, and even more strongly by the values and identity dimensions captured in the British Seven. But focusing on difference can overlook the key insight that Britons have a surprising amount of common ground on cultural identity. Most also accept that cultural change happens constantly and for good reasons. Where conflicts do occur, it is more often the result of the manner in which cultural change is occurring, rather than change itself. Cultural arsonists often seek to turn these divides over the means of change into a divide about culture itself, but there is a striking disconnection between the way ordinary Britons talk about these issues and the assumptions underpinning narratives of culture wars and the 'war on woke'.

For the rest of this section, we will explore how Britons deal with specific debates on culture and identity, alongside the stories of seven Britons (one from each of the British Seven segments) to show how people navigate cultural change in their everyday lives.

7 Centre for Policy Studies, July 2020: https://www.cps.org.uk/media/press-releases/q/date/2021/07/06/cps-publishes-landmark-survey-by-dr-frank-luntz-on-poli

2.2 How Britons navigate cultural change: the flashpoint issues

To create new flashpoints of conflict, commentators, activists, and politicians often talk and act as though every issue of identity and culture can only be handled in binary terms – patriot versus traitor, activist versus dinosaur, or us versus them. These binaries are misleading, and do not represent the way that most people think. When confronted by these terms, most Britons reject them. Even on issues that they have thought little about, they think about cultural change in more nuanced ways.

Empire and history

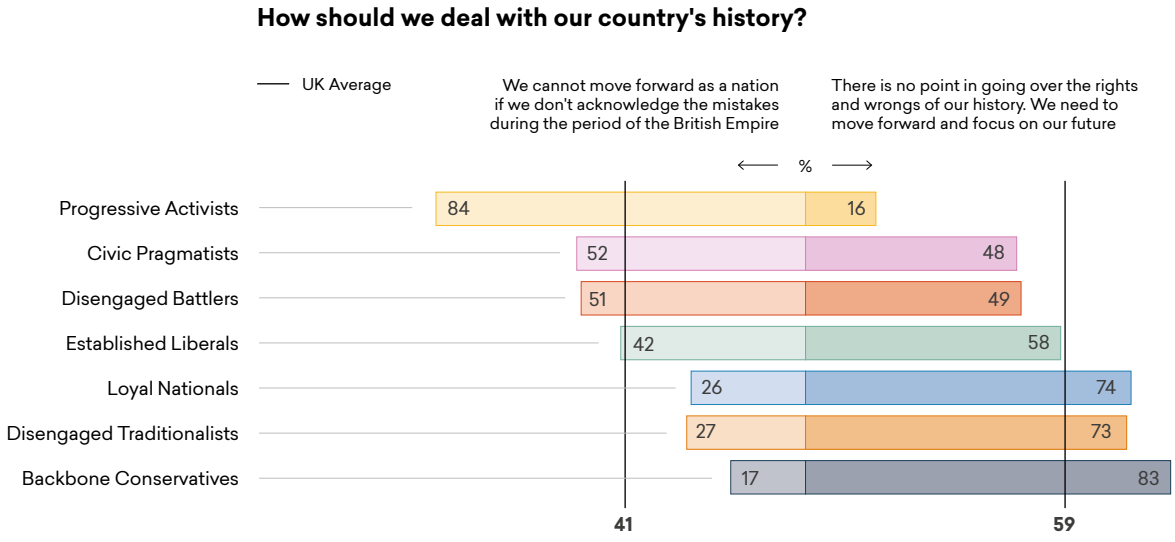
History plays an important role in the way that societies navigate change. Not only does history shape a people's story and sense of identity, but the way that people understand their past can profoundly influence attitudes to the future – such as the need to recover a storied past, to put right past wrongs, or to hold on to something essential.

Britons feel a deep sense of pride in their history. When asked their views about their country's past, 66 per cent of Britons express pride in comparison to 19 per cent expressing shame (with 15 per cent undecided). Three in five feels that the UK should just move forward and face the future, while two in five say we must acknowledge past wrongs in order to move forward. These questions on how we move forward are clear-cut for people in the most politically engaged segments (the Progressive Activists and Backbone Conservatives) – the former overwhelmingly opting for a reckoning with the past, the later opting to let bygones be bygones. As conversations with people in each of the seven segments showed, most people think about our history in nuanced ways and recognise mistakes and wrongdoings are part of that story – but do not think that they should dominate that story.

Figure 2

Dealing with the past

A majority believes we should focus on the future, not the past



February 2020. Source: More in Common

In the conversations we have convened, we find common ground on the importance of learning from history, including Britain's moments of shame. This was notable among people more likely to favour an approach to our past that does not obsess over the rights and wrongs of Empire. For example, Margaret, a Disengaged Traditionalist from London stressed the need to learn about our history "whether it is tasteful or distasteful". Another Disengaged Traditionalist, Graham, from Tyneside, felt we can only avoid the same mistakes of the past if "we educate people on the horror, and the tragedies and the misjustice" of the "empire, colonisation, and slave trade".

Debates about our past, including Britain's colonial past, too often ignore this resolve, widely shared across lines of political and demographic difference. Most Britons share a common aspiration for us to tell an ever fuller, truer, and more comprehensive account of our national story, and few feel that they know everything that they need to know. Most have no problem with the notion that Britain has accomplished much good throughout its history but has also made mistakes along the way. Debates often get lost on the fates of single statues or the specific policies of individual institutions such as the National Trust – but even on these issues, Britons have more common ground than the commentary might suggest. The key insight for leaders navigating cultural change related to our history is to understand that most Britons feel proud of their country's history, but also believe that their history involves some terrible injustices – from which they hope we have learnt and will continue to learn.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Statues

Many recent debates about empire and slavery have centred on whether statues of those who profited from the slave trade or had links to colonialism should remain in prominent public places across the country. The most well-known efforts to remove statues from these public spaces have been in Oxford (a statue of Cecil Rhodes) and Bristol (a statue of Edward Colston). The Government played into these debates with the Police, Crime and Sentencing and Courts Bill 2021, which increased the maximum custodial sentence for those prosecuted for damaging statues. It also introduced new planning laws to make it harder for local authorities to remove historic monuments.

As the debate over statues raged on social media and among commentators, politicians and campaigners also vowed to 'protect Churchill's statue' despite their being no evidence of any serious campaign to remove Churchill. As with the wider debate on history and statues, we also find that Britons from across segments approach Churchill's personal and political history with nuance and complexity. People feel pride in Churchill's wartime leadership and recognise him as a national hero – but we did not find anyone who was worried that his statues were in danger of toppling. As well as wanting to celebrate his many achievements, Britons from across segments feel it is possible (and important) to talk about Churchill's complex past - but in a way that does not detract from those achievements. They dismissed claims that President Obama 'cancelled' Churchill when he removed his bust from the Oval Office. This nuance suggests that not many people are fooled by confected and disingenuous efforts to stoke conflict over his legacy – instead, they often focus on the insincerity of those efforts. For example, Emily, a Disengaged Battler from Leeds, criticised the 'hypocrisy' of government ministers for condemning Black Lives Matter protestors for defacing Churchill's statue while remaining silent when some football fans did the same thing.

Churchill Statue, Parliament Square, during Black Lives Matter protest, June 2020
James Eades / Unsplash

This nuance extends beyond the legacy of prominent historic figures such as Churchill. Commentators often split the British public into statue slayers or saviours. But in the conversations that we convened, we found the British public to have more complex and nuanced views than those that often dominate public discourse. No one argued that statues, even of very controversial figures, should be destroyed. Instead, there were thoughtful debates on where the most appropriate place is to house statues with complicated personal histories and where to draw the line on moving statues. For someone like Churchill there was no debate that he was a national hero who deserves his position in Parliament Square and in our history.

Public attitudes towards the Bristol slave trader Edward Colston reflect a different historic judgment. The manner in which Colston's statue ended up in a river divided people, but there was more agreement that putting the statue in Bristol's M Shed Museum was more appropriate than the centre of the city. The conversations we have conducted around statues underscore the point that conflicts often relate less to a resistance to cultural change and the need to reappraise our history, and rather to a debate over the manner of that change – its pace and navigation.

I went down there and stood in front of the Colston statue as it came over. And my feeling was when I walked away, what was being reported in the media was completely different from the feeling that people had when they were out in the street. And I just thought it was just quite a special thing to see tens of thousands of people going through the street and wanting to be heard. And it's made some big changes in Bristol. The Colston Hall has been renamed.

– Stu, Progressive Activist, Bristol

They did the right thing, not in the right manner, but the right thing.

– Imelda, Civic Pragmatist, Bristol

I get why people are angry, of course, but there's probably not one statue that wasn't involved with slavery at the time. So, you'd have to pull every statue. It's kind of ridiculous in a way. It changes nothing. All it's going to do is cause more trouble.

– Owen, Civic Pragmatist, Manchester

Shouldn't history be in museums and books so we can learn from it? They shouldn't be lauded up in the middle of the city – I mean, he was accountable for branding women and children with hot irons on the chest. Do we really want to celebrate someone [like that] front and foremost in the city of Bristol, a multicultural city?

– ¬Alex, Disengaged Battler, Bristol

I think it's [a photo of the Edward Colston statue in the M Shed Museum] an absolutely fantastic snapshot of the feeling of the times and the feeling of the community – to see it displayed like that and to have the timeline and to raise the awareness. And it's better than just cancelling it all out altogether, isn't it? It's there. It's there as a new starting point for a conversation.

– June, Established Liberal, Middlesex

It's not like we have to take any statues down, or erase their names completely from our vocabulary. It's just we're talking about them in a way that is appropriate here. And it's just important to acknowledge that, yes, those people were slave traders, that's what happened. But there's no need to destroy things.

– Weronika, Loyal National, Stoke

Throwing it down the river defeats the whole purpose of the whole movement because if you throw it down the river, it's just gone. You can't just erase something that has already happened. Like many of you said, "It's already happened. It's history." So it's just better to acknowledge it and do not repeat it again. And putting it in a museum does that perfectly because, I think Simon said, it does show growth and does show that we moved forward with this, rather than throwing it down the river.

– Simone, Disengaged Traditionalist, Stoke

I think whether you're black or white really, why do you want these slavers to be so-called lauded on a plinth? Because it's not something that I can imagine that anyone is proud to have as part of their heritage, irrespective of actually which side of that heritage you were.

– Tanya, Backbone Conservative, London

Lanhydrock House, Bodmin (National Trust property)
Ray Harrington / Unsplash

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

National Trust and 'Retain and Explain'

The National Trust's recent 'retain and explain' policy and a 2020 report on links between National Trust properties and slavery has led to claims and accusations that the National Trust is pursuing a political and woke agenda. Across the seven population segments, we found a broad consensus that retain and explain is a sensible approach to addressing the issue of the proceeds of slavery in 2021.

In the focus group conversations that we conducted few people (even among National Trust members) had heard about this debate. One person who was aware of the controversy and had cancelled her membership in response is Becca, a Civic Pragmatist from Brighton. She felt that some of the Trust's explanations were exaggerated and that their message was that "all of your ancestors are horrendous racists and slave owners and everything else". She felt the National Trust was right to raise awareness on these issues, but felt they had been unbalanced. She said that she would consider re-joining if they adopt a more balanced approach in the future.

Gavin, a Civic Pragmatist from London felt that it was "good to put it up, but not in a sort of in-your-face way". Imelda, another Civic Pragmatist from Bristol felt it was the National Trust's "responsibility" to "give a true reflection of events". Katrina, a Disengaged Battler from Bristol drew parallels with the Edward Colston statue and affirmed, "lets learn from it".

Among Backbone Conservatives, who comprise one fifth of the National Trust membership, there was support for the National Trust's 'retain and explain policy' and little resonance for the culture wars framing:

You can't change it. So you may as well not hide it. You need to educate people further from it.

– Lesley, Backbone Conservative, Manchester

I think it's good that our past, the National Trust past, the Holocaust, et cetera, is made known. But I think one of the problems with history is everyone says we learn from it and I'm not so sure actually that we have the opportunity to learn and actually to try and make proper effective change.

– Tanya, Backbone Conservative, London

The people that objected to that were the same people that objected to the Colston statue being pulled down. But history is there to teach us. So, when National Trust step up and try and make that part of their new brand vision... Yeah. Again, they get pulled apart for doing it. So, yeah, it's just pick and mix with some people.

– James, Backbone Conservative, Sussex

Free speech and accountability

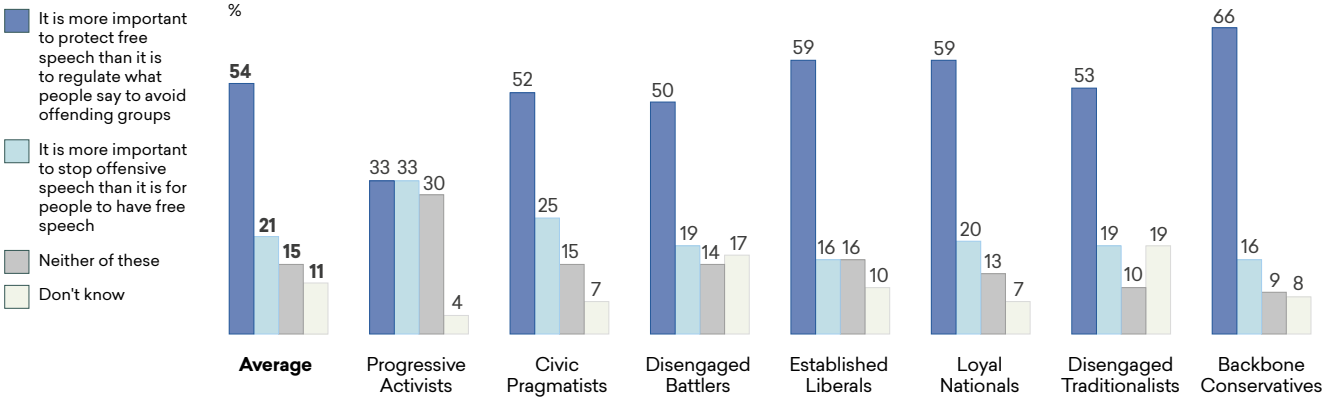
The pattern of conflict being centred more on how we go about change rather than change itself is reflected in discussions about freedom of expression and accountability. In our focus groups we found that many people view culture change through the lens of how people talk about it. There are widely-held concerns about people being pressured to speak a certain way and being judged for using particular words. It is not surprising that many debates about cultural change are dominated by discussions on free speech, accountability, offence, wokeism, and 'cancel culture'.

However, many of these debates present the false picture of a Britain riven in two. For some it is a battle between the gallant protectors of free speech and the perpetually offended generation woke. For others, it is a conflict between the barbarian offenders and the intelligent, aware, and empathetic new generation. What was striking from the conversations we convened was a recognition that it is important for people to be able to express their opinions freely, and to be accountable for the consequences of the things that they say.

Figure 3

Protecting freedom speech or stopping offensive speech

Britons are more than twice as likely to prioritise protecting free speech over regulation to avoid offense



Question: Which of the following, if any, comes closest to your viewpoint.
Source: More in Common - MHPC January 2021

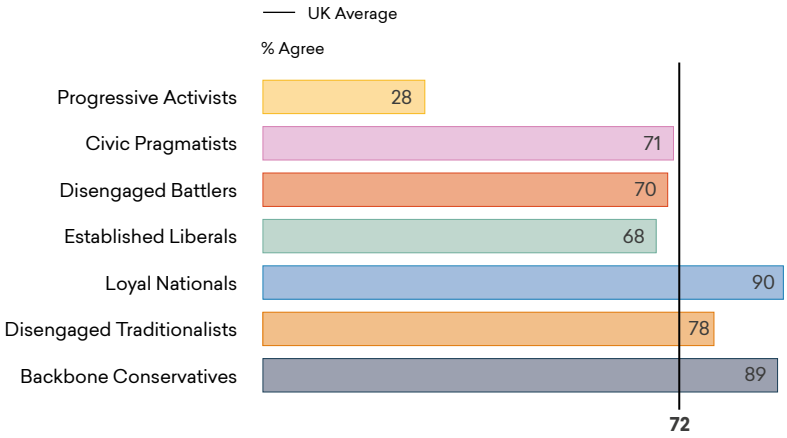
Britons are more than twice as likely to prioritise protecting freedom of speech (54 per cent) instead of regulating what people say to avoid offence (21 per cent). One in four either do not know (11 per cent) or choose neither option (15 per cent). This priority of free expression over avoiding causing offence reflects the view of a majority in all segments except the Progressive Activists. In focus group conversations, it was clear that many see the freedom to speak your mind as a democratic right that past generations secured at great price, and many feel a responsibility to protect it.

However, few people see freedom of expression as an absolute right that overrides other responsibilities. Again, the British public embraces a more nuanced approach. More than 70 per cent of Britons are concerned about the problems of both hate speech (71 per cent) and the fact that people get too easily offended nowadays (79 per cent). Britons think that political correctness is a problem (71 per cent), and more than three quarters also think it is important to protect people

from dangerous and hateful speech (77 per cent). This holds across all the British Seven segments – bar the Progressive Activists who are less likely to think political correctness is a problem or that we are too easily offended.

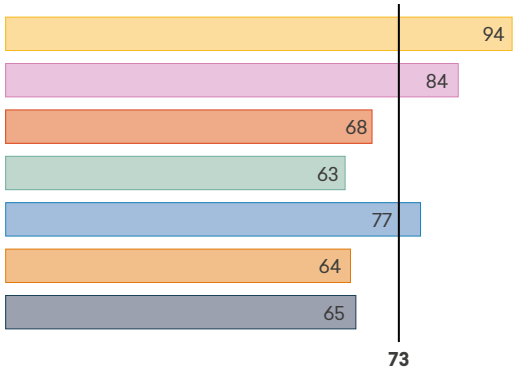
Figure 4

Political correctness is a problem in our country



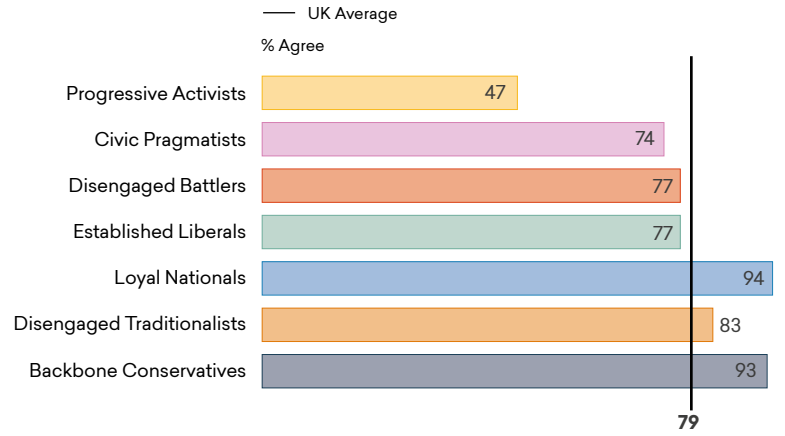
Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Political correctness is a problem in our country. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

Hate speech is a problem in our country



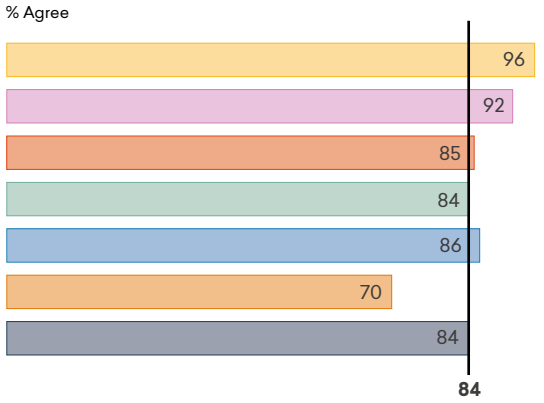
Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following: Hate speech is a problem in our country. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

People are too easily offended nowadays



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: People are too easily offended nowadays. February 2020. Source: More in Common 2020.

Democracies must protect people from dangerous and harmful speech



Qu. To what extent do you agree with the following: democracies must protect people from dangerous and harmful speech. Source: More in Common, January 2021

Concerns about feeling forced to speak a certain way, and crucially a fear of saying the wrong thing, are widely held, and result in self-censoring during conversations – several focus group participants asked, "am I allowed to say this?" But these concerns sit alongside an expectation that people should not lie or intentionally cause offence. Many feel that avoiding unnecessary offence is part of our responsibilities as citizens – good manners should prevail.

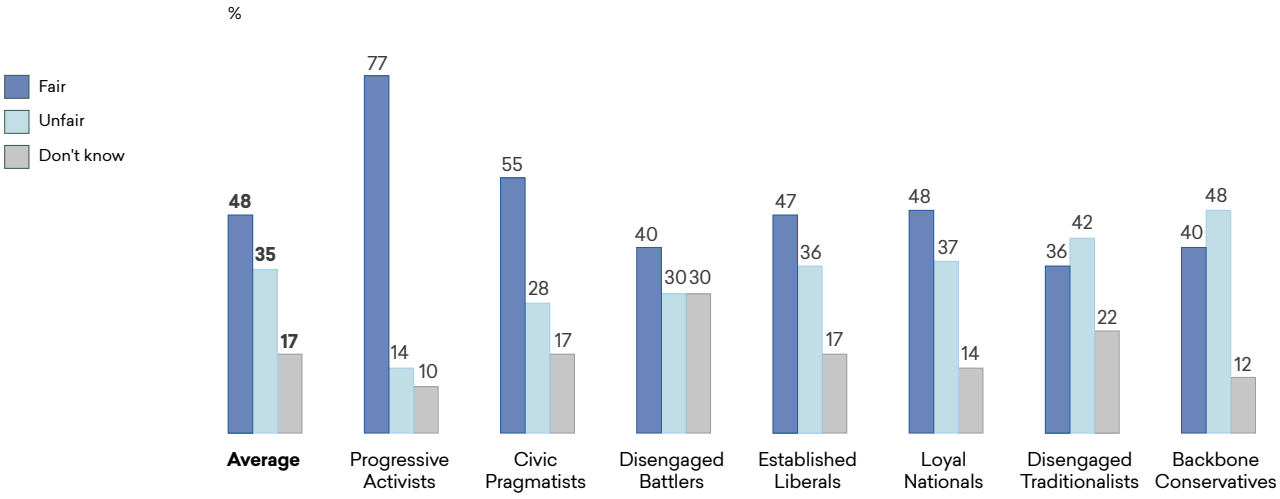
Simone, a Disengaged Traditionalist from Stoke, explained her revulsion to those who deliberately set out to cause offence:

> **That reminds me of the death of Prince Philip and how the younger people made it into memes and made it into a joke. Which I found it was really disrespectful because they were just making his death into memes. And they were making memes about the Queen and everything. I just found that really disrespectful, to be honest.**

This belief in accountability is reflected in the majority view that it is fair for people to be at risk of losing their livelihood for saying grossly offensive things. Britons are more likely to think this is fair (48 per cent respond fair, 35 per cent unfair, 17 per cent do not know), with only two segments disagreeing (Disengaged Traditionalists and Backbone Conservatives).

Figure 5

Britons are more likely to think it is fair than unfair that people can lose their jobs if they say grossly offensive things



Question: Do you think it is fair or unfair for people who say grossly offensive things to be at risk of losing their livelihoods? Source: More in Common – MHPC, January 2021

Beyond the question of gratuitously causing offence, for most Britons having the space to explore new ideas, test them in discussion, and make mistakes is as important as thinking about the issues where there are disagreements. Weronika, a Loyal National from Stoke spoke about the importance of being allowed to learn if she caused offence through unintentional misgendering of another person:

> **You can just correct us. There's no need to get super offended if we get something wrong. Everyone makes mistakes. I think it's better just to help people learn rather than hating on people for no reason because that's really unproductive.**

Many participants in the conversations highlighted the importance of people's intentions, arguing that genuine mistakes should be treated differently to those who set out to troll and offend others. Alex, a Disengaged Battler from Bristol, worried about the lack of accountability when "uninformed opinions" were proven "categorically wrong" and no retraction or any sort of accountability follows. This sense of accountability was shared among segments with more socially conservative values who value a more ordered society. For example, James, a Backbone Conservative from Sussex, dismissed so-called attacks on people's freedom of speech, arguing that those who say, "the most objectionable things" want "freedom from accountability".

Our conversations indicated that many Britons associate politeness and good manners with British values, alongside valuing free speech and accountability. Jeffrey, a Loyal National from London, felt an untrammelled license to offend was as out of line with the British approach:

> **I think we're quite reserved and we're very careful not to offend...The British way is, and I'm guilty of it, is you'll be sat in a restaurant going, "My steak's really tough. Is yours really tough?" "Everything all right with your meal?" "Lovely, thank you." Because you don't like to cause offense or trouble, so you just say what you think you need to say just to keep the peace rather than saying what you really think.**

Alongside valuing freedom to speak your mind, politeness and accountability for what is said, we frequently find frustration with a perceived culture of taking offence where none is intended. This was especially the case among Loyal Nationals.

> **I think we're also in danger of breeding this country of, the term they use is snowflakes, isn't it? Where people are now offended by being offended. And they look for something to be offended by. It's like, I could say, oh, I find Antiques Roadshow offensive because its people selling their old dead parents' stuff, but it doesn't mean you have to take it off the air and things.**
>
> *– Nigel, Loyal National, Manchester*

> **I think it's just like snowflakes. People who are offended by everything. And everything's got to stop because somebody is offended by something. I'm offended by that.**
>
> *– Louise, Loyal National, Tyneside*

Culture wars debates about free speech rarely respect the nuance of how people in Britain think about freedom of speech, offence and accountability. Cultural change should take place in a context where people feel free to express their feelings, ask questions and make mistakes – while remaining able to hold people accountable when they say things designed to offend or which are simply wrong.

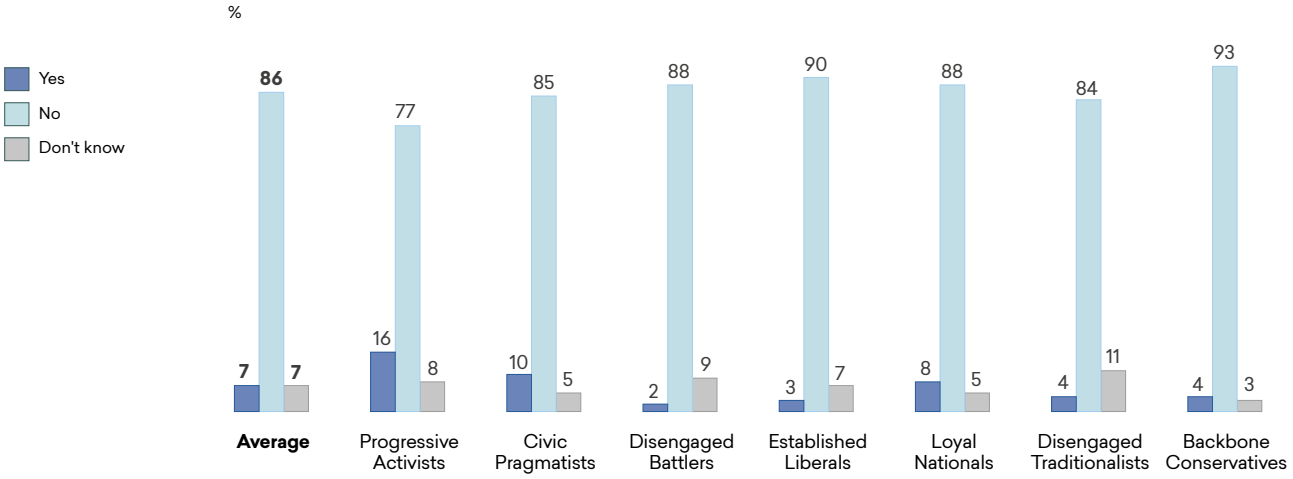
Understanding these nuances should give leaders pause when contemplating knee jerk reactions if confronted by a firestorm about free speech. In practical terms, especially in places of work and study that most often give rise to these debates, it suggests the best approach is to create spaces where people feel able to discuss culture and change in a respectful way. This is more in line with how Britons generally think than attempting to restrict or shut down debate for fear of causing conflict or offence.

But just as many Britons believe people should not be unfairly judged for saying something wrong, they are also wary of efforts to create exaggerated culture war responses. Many worry that this can be a distraction from the Government getting on with the job of levelling up, recovering from the pandemic, and tackling 'burning injustices'. The widely-discussed concept of cancel culture touches on the lives of few people – 86 per cent of Britons have not tried to get something they disagree with banned, withdrawn or cancelled in the past year, only 7 per cent of Britons have tried to do so, and another 7 per cent do not know if they have. Only 1 in 5 Britons believe that something or someone they know has been cancelled in the last year.

Figure 6

Cancel Culture

Most Britons have not tried to get something or someone 'cancelled'



Qu. Have you personally tried to get something or someone banned, withdrawn or cancelled because you disagreed with it? Source: More in Common - MHPC. January 2021

Public attitudes around freedom of expression and accountability reflect a nuance and complexity that is rarely evident in the highly charged narratives about snowflakes, cancel culture, and wokeism. While people differ in their emphases, most recognise that these are issues of both freedoms and responsibilities. What Britons most strongly reject are extremists on either end of the free speech debate – those who disingenuously pretend that free speech is under threat to inflame culture wars debates, and who humiliate people for making genuine mistakes. When it comes to free speech and accountability, Britons are balancers – and this balancing ability is too often ignored in popular discourse.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Oxford students vote to axe the Queen

Another example of a recent culture war flare-up occurred in June 2021, when a small group of graduate students at Magdalen College, Oxford voted to remove the Queen's portrait from the wall of their common room. Days later, a front-page headline appeared in the Daily Mail reading 'Oxford students vote to axe the Queen'.

We shared an image of this frontpage in our conversations with Britons in each population segment. The conversations that followed highlighted the deep affection, pride, and support felt for the Queen. Many felt that the students had been disrespectful. There was limited sympathy for the argument that the action was justified by the Queen's links with colonialism, or indeed whether it would do anything to tackle the underlying societal problems of racial inequality. As Emily, a Disengaged Battler from Leeds responded:

> **I mean, taking down the picture of the Queen, and also, what's the Queen done? I quite like the Queen. But taking down a picture of the Queen is not going to stop the fact that if you're black, a black boy's seven times more likely to be expelled from school. If you've got an ethnic sounding name and you're sending your CV out, you're much more likely not to get any of the sponsors... So maybe we need to concentrate on some of the institutional forms of racism.**

At the same time, across all the conversations we held there was a consensus that the incident was needlessly overblown.

> **It's a lot of fuss about nothing, isn't it? It's worded in quite a bad way, axing the Queen, but what that really means is taking a picture of her down.**
>
> *– Stu, Progressive Activist, Bristol*

> **I don't really care. I don't mind that it's there. I don't mind that it's not there.**
>
> *– Colin, Progressive Activist, London*

> **I just think it's not news. I just think it's silly to put that on a front page. It's stupid, I think. There's more important things happening.**
>
> *– Kirsty, Disengaged Traditionalist, Manchester*

> **I think it's best just to ignore it. Nothing's going to happen, just let it go. I don't think politicians should have got involved**
>
> *– Lesley, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside*

Many participants chalked the vote up to normal student behaviour and their process of growing up and pushing societal boundaries. Some remarked that the college should be free to choose what they want on their walls. Claude, a Loyal National from Brighton, questioned:

Well, it's their college, if they don't want it, why do they have to have it?

Graham, a Disengaged Traditionalist from Tyneside, said he expected these things to come from universities where people challenge the status quo:

When you meet new people, when you hear different perspectives, you grow up, and then you come up and you can challenge the status quo. You can ask questions about yourself, your life, your family's life, your family's held view, everything you've been told up to that point.

There was also bafflement at why a politician would get involved in something seemingly so minor. Commenting on the Education Secretary having tweeted out criticism of the students James, a Backbone Conservative commented, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic:

I think he has got better things to be doing...like trying to get the kids through school.

In conversations on this issue, while people overwhelmingly disagreed with the students' behaviour, most saw it as little more than typical student behaviour – and contrary to the binary narratives of culture wars, they were often more animated in criticising the way the issue had been blown out of proportion by leaders in the media and politics.

Buckingham Palace gates, London, UK, 2020
Hulki Okan Tabak / Unsplash

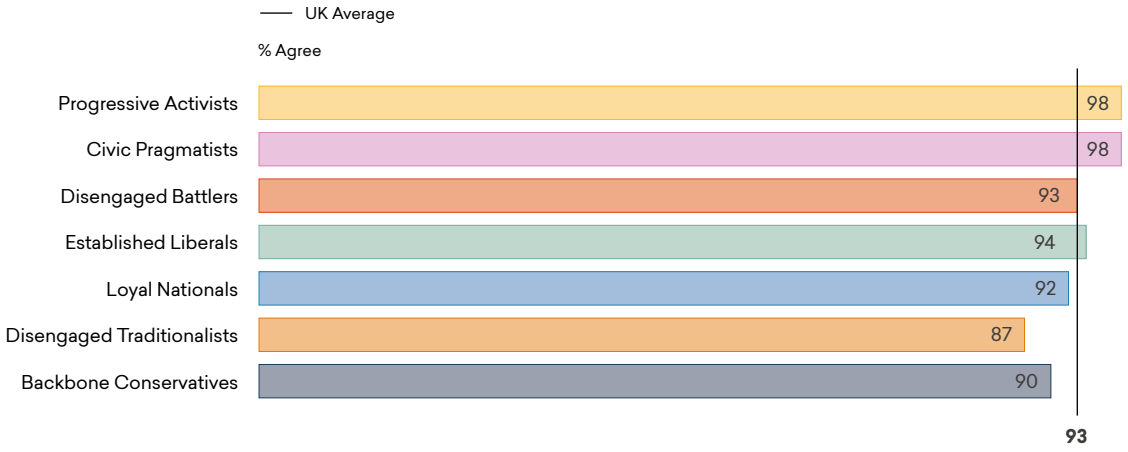
Diversity and Inclusion

Britain's diversity is a source of national pride. Sixty-eight per cent of Britons express pride that our country is now more embracing of people of diverse religions, races, and sexual orientation. Even more express pride in advancements in equality between men and women (77 per cent), and most Britons (58 per cent) believe that diversity has had a positive impact on the country.

Britons have an inclusive understanding of what it means to be British. There is almost universal acceptance (93 per cent) that anyone can be British regardless of colour, ethnic background or accent, and this universal agreement holds across all of the British Seven segments.

Figure 7

In the UK, a person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: In the UK, a person can be British regardless of their colour, ethnic background, or accent. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Pride in Britain becoming a more tolerant country is widely shared. People regularly cite Britain's journey in tackling homophobia and making progress on gay rights as an example of progress. Across every segment, Britons think that Gay Pride has been a force for good rather than a force for bad overall – by a margin of almost five to one.

In discussing this process of change, Britons regularly cite positively the role that both the popular media and politicians have played in attitudinal changes. The visibility of minority communities on TV, media, and film have helped to drive social progress – in our conversations, RuPaul's Drag Race was cited by several participants across segments as a show that had led to greater acceptance.

> **The soaps and things have same sex couples within that, so that makes it seem more acceptable if you like to people. It's bringing it to the fore that it is there. And we, as a society, are more aware that it's there and that has increased the tolerance.**
>
> *– Lesley, Backbone Conservative, Manchester*

Pride, 2019
Mercedes Mehling / Unsplash

Nevertheless, while the journey to gay equality was universally viewed positively, the same is not true for others whom sociologists describe as 'out-groups', such as refugees and immigrants. For example, conversations with people in the Loyal Nationals segment underscore their higher levels of suspicion and hostility towards immigrants.

A current flashpoint for cultural conflict is training and education around diversity in the workplace and in educational settings. This was raised unprompted in speaking with Established Liberals and Civic Pragmatists. Participants in the conversation made a distinction between efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in school versus the workplace. School-based initiatives were viewed positively in the group, with a strong sense that if we invest early in teaching respect for everyone at primary schools, children and young people grow up with less prejudice. Opinions about workplace diversity training were more divided - some found it helpful to challenge their own thinking (giving the example of unconscious bias training), some saw it as a start to encourage more appropriate behaviour, but others were either sceptical about its usefulness or frustrated with having to do it. Owen, a Civic Pragmatist, felt that little progress could be made on a short training course thinking, "it all starts from home really, doesn't it? And how you are brought up". Becca, also a Civic Pragmatist, was frustrated and felt that the training contributed to a "witch-finding culture" in her former workplace, a large public sector organisation.

Getting diversity training right is difficult; it places workplaces on the frontline of having to navigate cultural change and to act as a mediator between groups.

While nobody in our focus group conversations objected to diversity training as such, few felt that it was being done well. That finding, combined with experience in the US, suggests that leaders should pay particular attention to the risk of issues being ignited around diversity, equity, and inclusion training and systems. While the issue of how to incorporate insights from behavioural science into DEI training involves complex and contested questions,[8] three key insights from these conversations are that:

- building a culture of inclusion that employees take seriously needs to be an ongoing process rather than a tick-box exercise carried out in a single day
- while making it clear that there is no space for bigotry or harassment, it should be possible for people to feel able to ask questions even if that means that they make mistakes
- training should not set one group against another but should build greater understanding and respect across groups.

8 See as an example: https://themindgym.com/resources/the-inclusion-solution-whitepaper/

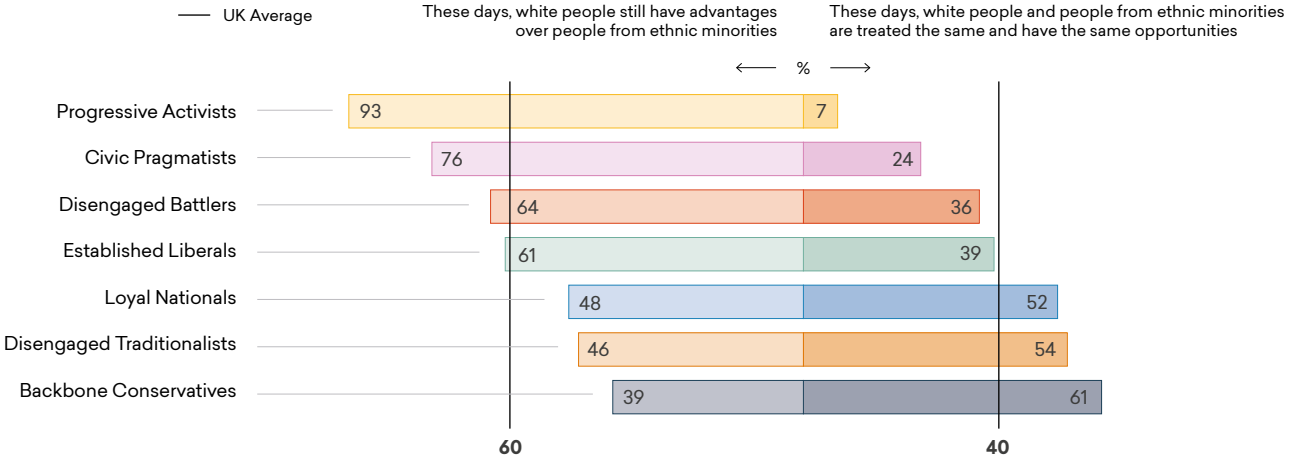
Race and Racism

Three in four Britons are concerned by the seriousness of racism in our country, and six in ten recognise that white people continue to have advantages over ethnic minorities. While the strength of that sentiment varies across segments, it commands a majority across all of them. However, when the debate is framed around the existence of white privilege, the gap between the segments grows.

Figure 8

White privilege

Most Britons recognise the existence of white privilege



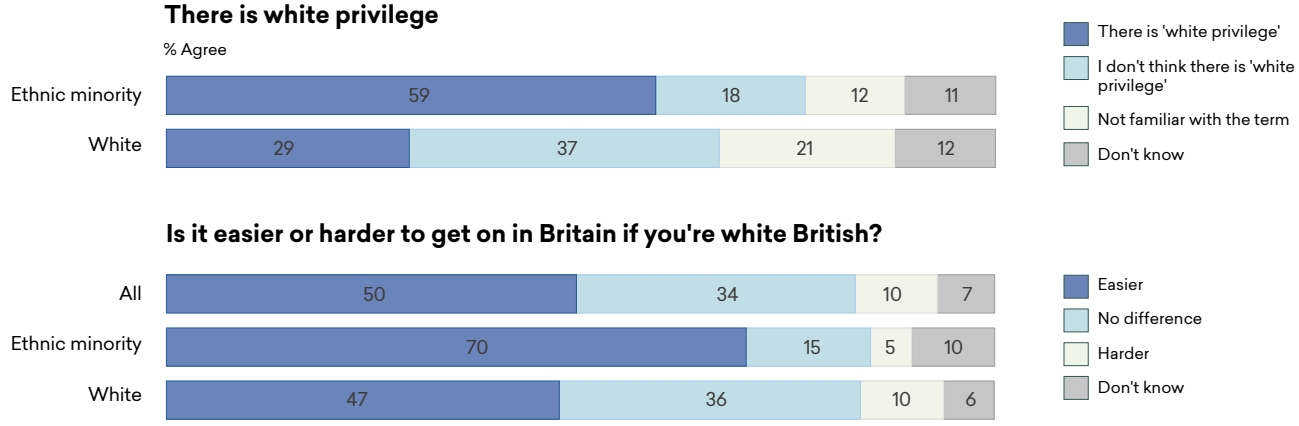
February 2020. Source: More in Common

Recent research by British Future shows that white Britons are more likely to acknowledge that life is easier for white people when plain and simple language is used.[9] Many more people agree when asked "is it harder or easier to get on in Britain, if you are white British?" compared to the abstract framing of "white privilege", which narrows support by 20 per cent and doubles support for the opposing view that white Britons do not find it easier to get ahead in Britain today.

Figure 9

Framing white privilege

White Britons are more likely to acknowledge white privilege when plain language is used rather than abstract framing



Source: British Future, October 2020. N = 1,088 white UK adults, 1,000 BME UK adults

9 https://www.britishfuture.org/public-appetite-for-action-not-just-talk-on-race-new-research/

Our focus group conversations suggest that scepticism about the concept of white privilege is strongest among Loyal Nationals. People in this group are more likely to feel strongly that they have never experienced privilege in their lives, and they are consistently more likely to feel that others look down on them than most other groups.

The use of white privilege framing is an example of a contentious narrative imported from the US. It is readily acknowledged by the public that racism remains a serious problem in the UK, but the concept of white privilege carries other meanings from the US that may not easily translate into the context of the UK. Anti-racism strategies in Britain will be most effective if grounded in evidence-based behavioural science.

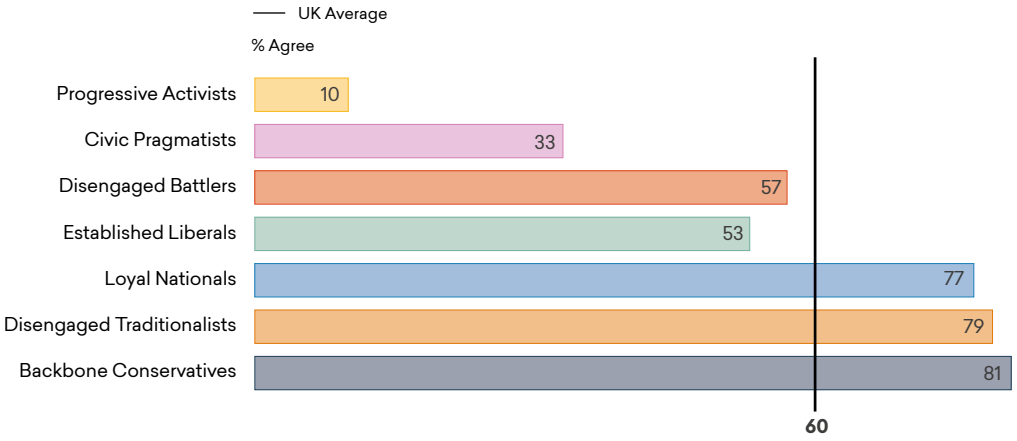
Issues around diversity and race are among the most sensitive in debates around cultural change. There is considerable common ground on issues of race (as Chapter 9 of the Britain's Choice report discusses), but the public is more evenly divided over whether we are doing enough to address racism or we are now too sensitive about things to do with race. This disagreement across progressive-traditionalist lines points to the challenge of navigating these issues in the future, with strongly-held views in different population segments.

Figure 10

Dealing with issues of race

Segments have differing views about how we deal with racism

Many people nowadays are too sensitive about things to do with race



Please say how well the following statements reflects your views using the scale below; Many people nowadays don't take racism seriously enough or many people nowadays are too sensitive about things to do with race.
Source: More in Common June 2020

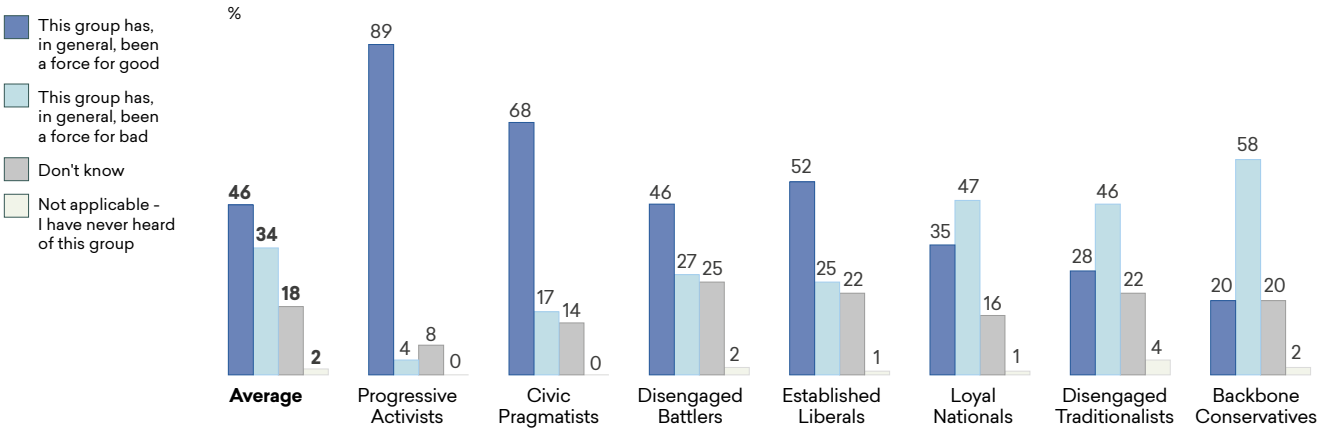
Similarly, while Britons are more likely than not to think that the Black Lives Matter movement has been a force for good in the last year, the differences across the segments are significant. While almost nine in ten Progressive Activists think the movement has been a force for good, only one in five Backbone Conservatives hold the same view.

When we probed more deeply people's views on the Black Lives Matter movement it was clear that people sceptical of BLM made a distinction between the political movement (where they often disagreed with both the group's tactics and ideology) and the ethical argument the movement is making (which found broad support). What many Britons dislike about radical activism is that they see it as tearing things down, rather than evolving and building on existing cultural norms. This is also reflected in climate debates – where most people, while supporting efforts to tackle climate change and reach net zero, do not believe that Extinction Rebellion has been a force for good.

Figure 11

Black Lives Matter

Segments differ on whether the BLM Movement has been a force for good or bad in the past year



Question: Please consider the following list of political groups and movements. For each, please answer whether you have heard of them and whether you think they have, in general, been a force for good or bad in the last 12 months.
Source: More in Common – MHPC January 2021

A key lesson for handling cultural change in the UK is that most Britons do not view the world through the lens of politics – they are grounded in the everyday, and think about change and progress in practical and concrete rather than symbolic terms. When we asked Britons what they thought most summed up the British approach to life, one participant responded immediately with 'queuing' a view that found widespread support among other participants. People view cultural change in a similar way, something to be done in a thoughtful, empathetic, and gradual fashion. In contrast, politicising or inflaming issues of social and cultural change might come at a cost to those leading the charge for change in Britain – rallying a small number of activists but losing the people who they need to persuade and bring with them.

That is not to say that outrage and expressions of anger cannot form the basis of social change – there are countless examples that show otherwise. There is also good evidence that in response to acts of palpable injustice such movements often command public support. But particularly when it comes to changing public opinion over the long term - the power of telling a positive story about change in Britain is an under-used and too easily dismissed tool for advocates and campaigners seeking to advance cultural change. The balance is tipped too often towards what is not working and what is wrong, and less about the progress that has taken place. Amplifying those positive stories can be a powerful tool in reaching segments less inclined to want to alter the status quo in Britain today.

We've made some movement, especially I'm going as the black man, as a family man with mixed race children, as a black man, who's most of my friends are white British. To be honest, last July was a stupidly heavy time for me personally. I know for different people they had different reasons, but it was a really heavy time. I learned so much, like I said, and now just little things, like I said earlier, seeing more diverse faces on the TV. For me that says a lot, the fact that we can have these conversations, I've been invited by the headmistress at my son's school to be on a panel. Okay, maybe because they're trying to get more diverse people. But I still think it's a positive at the end of the day.

– Peter, Established Liberal, Brighton

England's captain Harry Kane takes a knee during UEFA EURO 2020 between England and Germany, London, June 2021
Justin Tallis / Pool / AFP via Getty

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

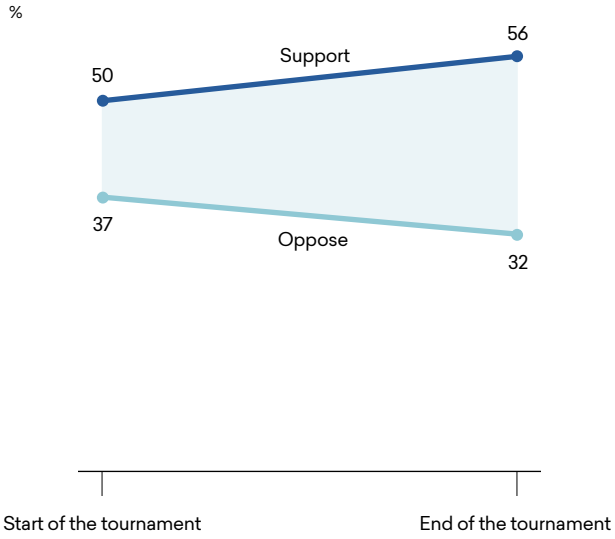
Footballers taking the knee

Since 2016, taking the knee has become a prominent anti-racist statement in sport, Black Lives Matter protests, and other contexts. England's football team has been taking the knee before kick-off to the sound of both booing and cheering fans. Among others, several prominent politicians have criticised these acts as the politicisation of football, while others have affirmed the actions as examples of courageous leadership.

Figure 12

Support for footballers taking the knee

Most Britons support England footballers taking the knee and this support grew throughout the Euros



Source: Opinium Research, June-July 2021

Public opinion polling shows majority support for taking the knee, which increased as England's team progressed to the final of the 2021 European Championship. Senior government ministers were forced to retreat from earlier criticisms that the England Team were taking part in 'gesture politics' that felt out of step with community sentiment – evidence of the risk of politicians wading too readily to back one side of a culture war debate.

Conversations conducted at the beginning of the championship generally found support for taking the knee and for action to tackle racism in football, but participants were nuanced on what taking the knee would ultimately achieve. Those views did not fall along predictable lines of partisanship or demographics, and views among the British Seven segments were diverse. Some Loyal Nationals and Disengaged Battlers, who would normally be sceptical about the injection of social justice narratives in sport, thought it was important for footballers to stand up for the cause of anti-racism and do so to show team loyalty and respect to other members of the team.

For me, seeing the other white footballers taking the knee sort of resonates. It just reminds me of watching those white students pull the statue down. Their teammates are black. So they're exposed to the racism that their own teammates experience... They've built up solidarity, they're friends. So when they see and hear of their own teammates being racially abused, obviously they're going to feel solidarity with them. Whether other people get that or not is irrelevant. So when I see white footballers taking the knee in solidarity of their black and brown colleagues, I think, "Yeah, that's really nice."

– Alex, Disengaged Battler, Bristol

I think the footballers do it because they work together. They play together, they respect each other. That's why I think footballers do it...They respect their teammates...Everybody's got a cause, so stand up for your cause. Don't get rid of them. If you think they're genuine!

– Tommy, Loyal National, Stoke

Some Civic Pragmatists, Established Liberals and Disengaged Traditionalists, while not objecting to taking the knee, were unsure whether it was meaningful, and questioned how effective such symbolic gestures were at delivering change.

We can't eradicate racism from putting a few banners up or taking the knee, it's kind of laughable really, you're not going to change racism that they've had for 20, 30 years, so it's been a waste of time, really. I think, personally, it needs to go deeper, it needs to go to education in schools. It needs to go through other avenues rather than just a signature move at a game, which is taking the knee, which I don't think really works. So we need to go deeper than that I think.

– Owen, Civic Pragmatist, Manchester

The message needs to stay. You need to keep the message fresh on people's minds. You do that by reinventing, reigniting and getting people's interests back again, and keep it there through different forms of education, different form of presentation.

– Graham, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside

Isn't it just a bit symbolic, what they're doing? I also think the people that boo them are just ignorant, to be quite honest

– Margaret, Disengaged Traditionalist, London

A smaller number of people criticised the action, saying for example that the atmosphere around taking the knee and the reaction of fans was off-putting.

I don't think anyone in their right mind would say I don't agree with anti-racism, but I just think maybe it touches on what I was saying earlier. It's the very aggressive nature, "Do what I say or else" rather than trying to encourage people to get on board with things.

– Peter, Established Liberal, Brighton

However, despite occasional scepticism as to whether taking the knee would lead to real change, across our conversations we did not find any support from the public for the small minority of fans who booed players that did.

Similarly, Gareth Southgate's recent 'Dear England' letter resonated across lines of differences in our focus groups and was seen as a shining example of the kind of leadership Britain needs to navigate cultural change well and one that Britons want to see more of. James, a Backbone Conservative from Sussex described the letter as 'genius'.

Football, music, film, everyone has such a ... If you have a platform then for Christ's sake use it.

– James, Backbone Conservative, Sussex

It's an example of leadership, I think. And that's what I'd like to see more of amongst other leaders.

– Leanne, Progressive Activist, Brighton

Didn't Gareth Southgate publicly come out and ask the English fans not to boo? Yeah, which I thought was great. And I don't know, maybe these coaches and captains that are being paid ridiculous amounts of money, maybe they do need to stand up a bit more and address people publicly, their fans publicly, and call for them not to boo.

– Camilla, Disengaged Traditionalist, Brighton

2.3 Stories from the British Seven

In June 2021, we were lucky enough to speak to people from across the country about their views on a wide range of issues that come up in debates about culture and identity. We spoke to members of the public who make up each of the British Seven segments. As we listened, we recognised traits and attitudes that resonate with the social identities of those seven groups – but as a whole, their perspectives underscored that when Britons tune in on cultural debates, they do so with nuance on an issue-by-issue basis. That nuance is best understood by digging deeper into the views of the individuals themselves and learning more about their stories.

Leanne, Progressive Activist, Sussex, 41 years old

Leanne leads a charity supporting community groups across her area and has three kids. Even before the pandemic, she was worried about the growing inequality between the haves and have-nots in Britain. Working with many people in need over the last 18 months, she has seen the "divide grow even more".

Leanne says that she has "very strong views" on societal issues, and she only watches programmes on TV that she thinks she will agree with – though she admits this is one of her weaknesses. Back when she was travelling the world 25 years ago, her friends would contact her through the central post office in each capital city on her trip. Nowadays, Leanne finds that everything seems to move faster and has the feeling that things are 'always on' – she escapes once in a while by turning off her phone for the day.

Leanne recently watched 'It's a Sin', a programme about the advent of the AIDS crisis and its impact on gay men in the 80s. She is proud of how the UK has become less homophobic since then - though a recent conversation with her father-in-law reminded her that differences in views still exist. She thinks most people were in favour of pulling down the Edward Colston statue, but the opposing minority were given a louder voice in the media. She thinks the Daily Mail was 'stirring up a problem that's probably not even there' with their front page story about Oxford students 'axing' the Queen. She is frustrated with the mainstream media for increasingly abandoning facts in their coverage.

She was inspired by Gareth Southgate's 'Dear England' letter and thinks it is an example of what she would like to see among other leaders. She wants there to be more accountability for politicians when they lie or break the rules – and feels if she broke the rules, there'd be consequences, and that politicians should face the same fate. This accountability is particularly important for Leanne when it comes to inciting hate or violence, saying people need to be "pulled up" if they "say something that causes harm to another person".

Leanne is very supportive of the National Trust's 'retain and explain' policy – seeing "real value in finding out the truth about what's happened and owning that story". She recognises that some members left over this but has heard others seeing the policy as positive and signing up as members.

Leanne is undecided about whether there is a culture war in the UK. She thinks people have become very accepting and she believes we live in a fair and equal society – but concludes that if there is a culture war, it's being stoked by the media. Participating in a focus group conversation with a group of Backbone Conservatives as well as other Progressive Activists left her feeling "uplifted".

Becca, Civic Pragmatist, Brighton, 43 years old

Becca is from a village near Brighton. She is an engineer by trade and used to work for the NHS. Becca describes herself as 'politically homeless' – she feels trapped in the centre, unrepresented by either major side of politics. Many of the people she knows feel the same way she does.

Becca is tired of the constant confrontation, drama, and noise of political and societal debates and says that she just wants the hysteria to stop. While she thinks the US is more divided and in worse shape than the UK, she became increasingly frustrated with all the focus on former President Trump and his tweets last year.

When it comes to social change, Becca would love to see a 'multi-pronged approach' for changing attitudes to social issues, as was done with tackling homophobia. She respects the role politicians played in delivering progress on gay rights but is frustrated with the current crop of politicians who, she thinks, do not care about change and only want 'soundbites' or the 'right tweet'.

Becca thinks it is important to raise awareness on diversity and thinks 'taking the knee' has been good at raising the profile of racism in the UK, but she finds the 'do what I say or else' approach of both diversity training and taking the knee as too aggressive. She says she would never tell a friend they have the 'wrong view' on something – her approach is to discuss the issue even when she does not agree. Becca also thinks it's important that people have the space to make mistakes when dealing with cultural change.

Despite loving regular visits to country houses, Becca recently resigned her National Trust membership because she was unhappy about the direction the Trust was taking on the 'retain and explain' policy, which explains the links that National Trust properties have to slavery and colonialism. She thinks it is important to learn true history but feels the National Trust's approach is over-the-top. She says that if things change at the Trust, she would consider re-joining in the future.

Becca is sceptical about some of the protests she sees from activist groups such as Extinction Rebellion. She is worried that people on zero hour contracts have lost the opportunity to earn money due to the tactics employed by protestors like Extinction Rebellion. She thinks climate change activism is something that rich and privileged people are more likely to get involved in.

Emily, Disengaged Battler, Leeds, 42 years old

Emily is a substitute teacher from Leeds. She thinks Covid-19 should have been treated as a health and scientific issue and not a political one. For her, the politicisation of the pandemic shows the country is becoming more divided and polarised. She thinks the post-Brexit border in the Irish sea is a problem and thinks that how a person voted for Brexit can tell you much about what they think about most cultural changes.

Fed up with debating and arguing with people on social media, Emily has decided to manage her social media channels by blocking certain words and people, because she does not want to be 'bombarded by bullshit' anymore. She concedes that some may see this as hypocritical, but explains that she is feeling the consequences of disinformation personally. Her brother has been engrossed in QAnon and online conspiracies in recent times, and they have grown apart as a result and no longer talk.

Emily has a mixed race background. After the murder of George Floyd, she spent a lot of time explaining to others why the saying 'All Lives Matter' was offensive to her and others. She thinks there has been some progress on 'overt' racism in the UK, but people need to be more 'clued up' on more 'covert' types of racism like micro-aggressions. She accepts that many micro-aggressions do not come from bad places, but people need to learn.

Emily is sceptical about politicians' ability to advance cultural change – saying 'if it fits their narrative, they'll condone it. If not, they'll be silent'. But she has been impressed by the leadership of imams tackling vaccine hesitancy in the Islamic community, Sajid Javid's efforts to tackle Islamophobia in the Conservative Party, and the leadership of Marcus Rashford on free school meals.

She thinks we are 'super-lucky' to have the BBC as a source of shared and objective facts for both sides of the debate but is weary of giving space to conspiracy theorists when all the evidence points in one direction. She is a regular listener to James O'Brien's Radio Show on LBC and appreciates what she sees as his 'even-handedness'.

She questions the symbolic tactics used by activists. She thinks people have lost patience with Extinction Rebellion once they stopped people from getting to work. She was baffled by the campaign of Oxford students to take down the Queen from the walls of their common room – she feels it will do nothing to combat institutional racism and other forms of discrimination in society, and she is a fan of the Queen.

Emily recently returned to her hometown of Leeds after living in London for some time. She finds the differences in attitudes between the two cities to be striking – and thinks it is only the NHS and an England victory in the Euros that could bring the country together.

June, Established Liberal, Middlesex, 64 years old

June is from South London. She was proud when Britain hosted the G7 in Cornwall – she thought the weekend was a 'showstopper' and showed just how beautiful Britain can be.

During the various lockdowns of the pandemic, June watched a lot of good TV, but grew bored after a while. Though some people have slipped through the safety net, she thinks the furlough support has been fantastic, but is deeply concerned with the pandemic's impact on people's mental health.

June trains primary school teachers. She thinks cultural and societal change starts young, when you teach children how to respect one another at primary school. She is delighted that people are listening to Greta Thunberg and taking her climate activism seriously.

Looking back on the progress on gay rights over decades, June thinks it took so many things, from protest groups to arts to drama (including her favourite TV show 'Six Feet Under'), to make progress. The powerful testimonies of those imprisoned for their sexuality was something that June feels changed peoples' minds. June believes politicians played an important role in legalising homosexuality over the years – but is frustrated that today they seem more interested in soundbites than actual change on other issues.

June thinks the National Trust have got it right with the 'retain and explain' policy and has been particularly impressed with the 'amazing work' they do in their outreach to children. She thinks that the re-housing of the Edward Colston statue in a museum in Bristol was the best thing to do. She thinks it is much better than destroying it, it captures the feeling of a community at that moment of change, raises awareness, and creates a new starting point for conversations. She thinks cancelling or destroying the statue would have achieved nothing.

June thinks we can unite the country if we are more respectful and understanding and do a better job listening to one another.

Tommy, Loyal National, Stoke, 73 years old

Tommy is a retired court clerk from Stoke. He spends his days gardening and watching TV and is an avid football fan, supporting England all the way through the Euros.

Tommy's vote to leave the European Union in 2016 was motivated by his concerns about the 'mess' the government was making over border control and illegal immigration. He thinks the rising crime across the UK can be attributed to immigrants and feels that the white people of England are becoming a minority. He blames the current saga on the Irish sea border on the EU's intransigence.

Tommy feels a loss of community spirit and looks back fondly on the way people were closer to each other when he was younger. He blames technology for many of the changes we have seen in recent times. He thinks cars mean we travel alone rather than together on the bus, and holds big tech companies responsible for an erosion of values due to social media. Tommy thinks government should do more to respond to these challenges.

Despite having clear and strong views on immigration, Tommy has more complex and nuanced views when it comes to taking the knee and taking down statues. While he does not support the political arm of the Black Lives Matter movement, he supports footballers taking the knee to stand up against racism for ordinary black people. Tommy thinks footballers take the knee because they are loyal to their teammates who are subject to racist attacks. He thinks that genuine people who have a cause should stand up for it, like the footballers example when they take the knee. He sees it as a powerful tool to keep the anti-racism message in people's minds.

Tommy is less sure when it comes to what do with statues of people who have profited from slavery. He did not agree with the students who called to take the Rhodes statue down in Oxford, because he thinks that history is there to be seen, not admired. At the same time, he appreciates how antagonising it must be if you see these statues and you personally, or your family, are connected to that history of slavery. He draws comparisons with the statues of dictators taken down in other countries – he sees these acts of destruction as part of history as well.

Tommy's grandchildren live in the United States, and he sees them growing up with patriotism for their flag and country being drummed into them. He sees the UK as different where people look down on the flag, not up to it. Tommy thinks Britain is a conservative nation – polite, fond of queuing, not ones to be shouting or taking to the streets. He thinks trust in politicians would be restored if society was less divided into 'us' and 'them'.

Graham, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside, 40 years old

Graham comes from a former mining town in the North East and works as a project manager. He wants the government to make a success of Brexit, but he thinks it is going badly. He is disappointed with the Government, and feels that this generation of political leaders are too interested in soundbites.

Graham is proud that Britain has become more multicultural in recent years. He thinks that people who come from abroad, particularly Eastern Europe, have a much better work ethic than most Britons and he prefers employing them over other Britons. At the same time, he blames the lack of job security in the North East on globalisation.

Graham wants footballers to move on from taking the knee – he supports the idea of uniting against, and shining a light on, racism, but he thinks that they need other ways of sharing this message to keep the idea in people's minds like "players of different colours to lining up alongside and link arms". He has concerns about the Black Lives Matter political movement.

Graham is annoyed and frustrated by things he regards as virtue signalling. He thinks too many people want to be do-gooders – but they are not doing the real work of going out to protest, fundraise, and find ways to get legislation passed.

Graham saw the Daily Mail headline about 'Oxford Students Axe the Queen' as a predictable example of the Daily Mail pandering to their readership. He thinks it would be more surprising if controversial ideas were not coming from universities. He thinks university is a place where "you meet new people, when you hear different perspectives, you grow up. And then you come up and you can challenge the status quo. You can ask questions about yourself, your life, your family's life, your family's held view, everything you have been told up to that point". He believes that universities have always been "hotbeds" of questioning what is wrong and what can we do better, and feels that will always upset the status quo and the Daily Mail.

Graham is concerned about us erasing our past by tearing down statues and warns that we will only be able to avoid the same mistakes of the past if we educate people on the horrors, tragedies, and misjustices caused by empire, colonisation, and slave trade. He thinks we need more history, not less. Graham sees freedom of speech as an essential tool in navigating cultural change in Britain. He accepts that not everyone will agree but the ability and right to disagree and voice your opinion is vital.

Lesley, Backbone Conservative, Manchester, 58 years old

Lesley works at an FE College in Manchester as an employability and careers advisor. She has three adult kids and is grateful for an emptier house now that they have all moved out. The last 18 months have been hard for Lesley, as her mum was admitted to a nursing home, and she could not visit for 6 months. She worries about the mental health impacts of the continuing pandemic. She had virtual weekly coffee mornings with her family throughout the lockdowns, with her sister-in-law from Australia joining them in the middle of the night.

Lesley's work has changed a great deal since the beginning of the pandemic. Lesley says that the cloud-based file storage system SharePoint has become her new filing cabinet, and she loves the paperless office.

Lesley believes that a majority of people in Britain are very tolerant and on the whole Britain is a tolerant society. She contrasts the freedom with which the students whom she mentors talk about their own sexuality today with the experience of a friend of hers who was in a same-sex relationship for thirty years and was unable to tell his mother. She thinks the popular media, the soaps in particular, have increased awareness and tolerance in UK society.

Lesley has doubts about whether toppling statues is a good thing for British society. She thinks history is there for us to think about so that these bad things can never happen again – and thinks the Slavery Museum in Liverpool does a great job in this respect by helping people learn about their history in ways that are thought-provoking and create an emotional connection. Retaining these elements of our past, rather than rubbishing them is how Lesley thinks we should deal with it.

Lesley was not aware of the 'retain and explain' debate with the National Trust and does not think the policy will influence people visiting any of the sites, but thinks the Trust has a right to say that they will be accountable for their past. She did read the Daily Mail headline about 'Oxford students axing the Queen' but she did not read further because she is a "massive fan of the Queen".

Lesley strongly believes in everyone's right to their own opinion. Her husband believes the earth is flat and even though she disagrees with him she believes he is entitled to his opinion. She believes that a diversity of opinions is what makes our society great, and it is what people have fought to protect in the past. She thinks that you should be allowed to say, within reason, how you feel, what your opinion is, but also be kind to each other and show respect. She thinks that those people who hoped the Prime Minister would die from Covid-19 need to be held accountable.

She thinks that 'taking the knee' has raised more awareness about racism in football – but she is disappointed by the lack of focus of tackling homophobia in football. She thinks if footballers will tackle one issue, they should be consistent and tackle other issues like homophobia.

Lesley thinks Covid-19 has united the country and showed that we could come together in the face of adversity – she also felt this in Manchester after the Manchester bomb. She found the experience of clapping for carers on Thursday nights proved that we could pull together in hope and move forward.

Statue of Millicent Fawcett, London, 2020
Guy Pendlebury / istock

Chapter 3
A common ground approach to cultural change: Three lessons

Disagreements over issues of identity and culture are not a new phenomenon. Britain has a long history of navigating cultural change, and the overwhelming majority believes that the advancements in equality and tolerance in recent decades have made us a better country. From changes in family life and gender equality to same-sex marriage, the rejection of overt prejudice, greater respect for nature and our common resolve on climate change – leaders in politics, the media, national institutions, business, faith, alongside local community leaders in schools and workplaces have shown up, come together, and navigated cultural change in ways that have transcended the fault lines within our society. Of course, these changes were not easy, universally supported, or at the pace everyone would have preferred. But what is striking is that so many of them have in time become uncontroversial and enduring.

Looking at some of these examples we can learn more about how we might better navigate change in Britain today.

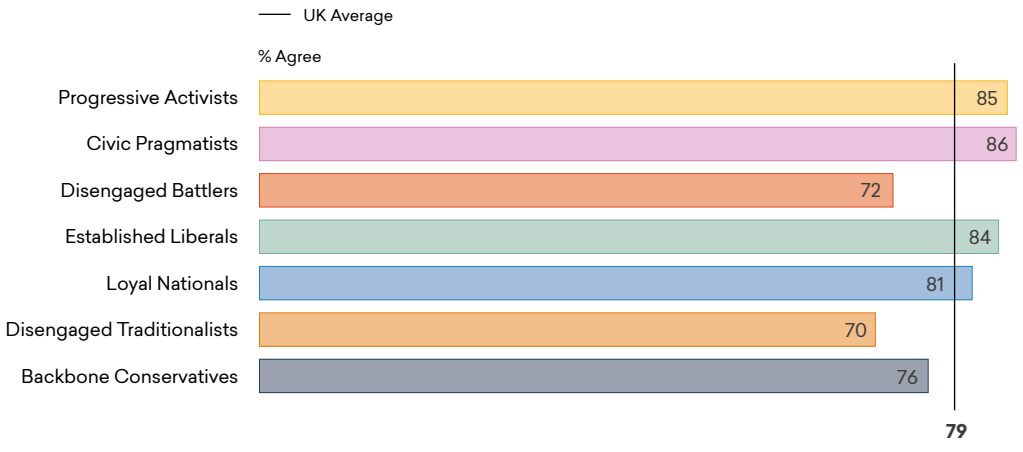
Lesson one: Family and women's rights

The role of women in households, gender equality, and attitudes to family life have changed dramatically over the past century. While gender equality is an ongoing journey, women of all generations speak of the very significant differences between the world in which their mother grew up and their own lives. Driven by campaigners and parliamentarians, but implemented in institutions such as schools and workplaces, over the past century we have seen women win the right to vote, employment, equal pay, the prohibition of sex discrimination, the liberalisation of divorce laws, and access to contraception and abortion. More recently there has been concerted efforts to tackle violence against women and girls, and remove barriers to women from the entry level careers in STEM to seats on the boards of FTSE 100 companies.

These achievements, while still incomplete, are a shared source of pride with four in five (79 per cent) Britons saying they are proud of the progress made in equality between men and women.

Figure 13

I am proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women



Qu. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I am proud of the advancements we have made in equality between men and women. February 2020.
Source: More in Common 2020.

Leadership on gender equality has come from across society. Schools have worked to dispel stereotypes about 'women's' and 'men's' jobs. As well as trying to tackle explicit bias, workplaces have sought to address structural barriers to women's progression by becoming more family friendly. Advocates and campaigners have highlighted inequity and built broad coalitions to advance change. Politicians – whose ranks have only gradually become more representative of women – have shown leadership in passing anti-discrimination legislation and promoting transparency through measures such as gender pay gap legislation.

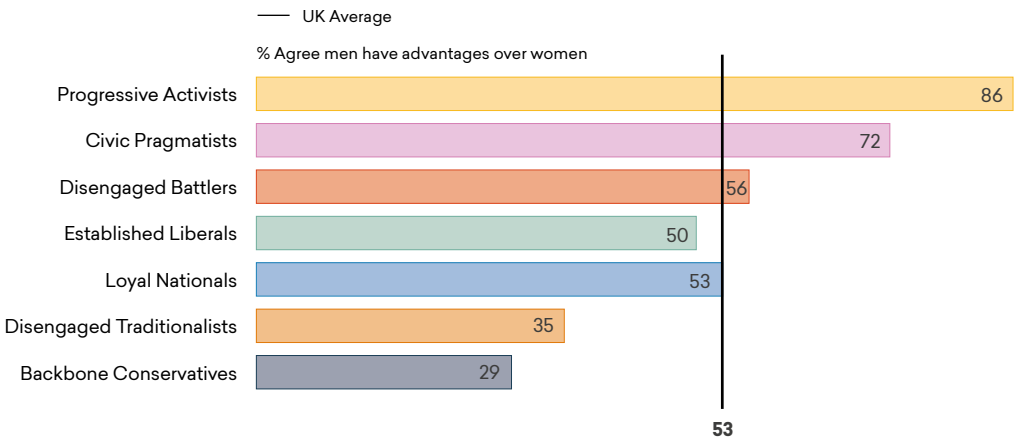
Looked at from the perspective of Britain in 2021, these changes are easily taken for granted. But until 1975 women could not open bank accounts in their own name. Until 1982, women could be refused service in pubs with no consequences. And as recently as 1992, husbands could force their wives into sexual intercourse without this constituting rape. Only ten years ago, in 2011, 43 per cent of all FTSE 350 companies had no female board members – and now none do. The scale of change has been both significant and enduring, a testament to the work of Britons leaders and institutions.

Even so, there is further progress to be made. In our recent focus group conversations, participants reflected on both the progress made on a more inclusive approach to family life and the progress still to come – and on the inequalities highlighted during the pandemic. June, an Established Liberal from Middlesex felt that more work remains to be done to level the playing field to tackle bias on interview panels. Weronika, a Loyal National from Stoke felt that more needs to be done to ensure support for women who are sexually assaulted, and more work was needed to give girls access to education. Rory, an Established Liberal from Bristol felt that attitudes had changed – but there is still more to do.

Figure 14

Gender equality

A majority believe that men still have advantages over women, but two segments disagree



Which do you agree with more? "These days, we seem to give an advantage to women over men" or "these days, men still have advantages over women" or "These days, neither men nor women have an advantage over each other". Source: More in Common, February 2020.

While differences exist among the segments, most Britons (53 per cent) agree that men still have advantages over women in society today. Only 20 per cent say the opposite. They agree that work ought to continue to make family life more inclusive and gender equality a reality. The good news is that when it comes to gender equality, there is a credible pathway to building on that shared pride that Britons have in the advancements made in gender equality in the last century.

Lesson two: LGBTQ+ rights and marriage equality

Across our conversations, it was striking that every group talked with pride about the progress Britain has made on tackling homophobia and delivering progress on gay rights in recent decades. This common pride is testament to the way campaigners and leaders navigated this change successfully, most notably by relating it to people's everyday experiences and working to bring sceptics with them, rather than 'othering', and shutting down discussion. Politicians and public figures too came in for praise for the way they had stewarded changes on attitudes and to the laws around gay people.

Given those advances, it is easy to forget how recent change was. Until 1967, homosexual sexual acts were a criminal offence. In 1988 the Government effectively prohibited teaching about LGBT relationships in schools. Gay marriage has only been legal in the UK for less than a decade. And alongside these legislative advancements the change in public attitudes has been just as striking. In 1987, 75 per cent of the British public said that same-sex relations between two adults were always or mostly wrong. That figure was just 17 per cent in 2019.[10]

In the conversations that More in Common convened for this report, participants reflected on the progress made, how that progress came about, and the work still to be done:

They've recently changed the rules on blood donation now as well. That if you're in a gay, stable relationship, then you can give blood now, when you couldn't before which I think is fantastic.

– Hazel, Backbone Conservative, Bristol

How did we get to here? It's through so many different things, isn't it? It's through the arts and drama, it's through protest groups. It's through maybe seeing somebody that you really respect and them imprisoned for their sexuality. That has happened in my lifetime, hasn't it?

– June, Established Liberal, Middlesex

I think there's all sorts of things. There was initiatives by the government in the '90s, wasn't there, equalizing age of consent. I think there's a been a multi-pronged approach and everything has started to come together. And I'd really love to see this for some of the other issues we've got as well... What we didn't do was go out in mobs in the street and destroy things. But I think there was a big push...it was a movement. And I think the government of the day responded to that – they could see it was a vote winner, they could see it was something popular, and hopefully they knew it was the right thing to do. And it's something that seems to just gradually evolve.

– Becca, Civic Pragmatist, Brighton

10 British Social Attitudes Survey, 36 (The National Centre for Social Research, 2019) https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/key-findings.aspx

One of the things that does disappoint me slightly, certainly in football terms, is the lack of focus on, say, homophobia within that sport... I think there'll be very few people who would be confident in coming out to their team members and what have you. And certainly less confident about coming out to fans because I don't think they feel they'd get that level of support within a club and within a fan base.... I think if we're going to take on issues that are relevant, then we have to take on all kinds of issues as well.

– Lesley, Backbone Conservative, Manchester

Alongside the efforts of campaigners and politicians, as with the advances in gender equality, much of the work to navigate change towards acceptance of same-sex relationships took place in the everyday organisations that people experience in their daily lives. Freed from Section 28, schools across the country embraced work to tackle homophobic bullying and teach about the diversity of family life. Businesses highlighted visible LGBT role models and supported staff network groups as visible demonstrations of their commitment to equality, recognising that creating working environments where people can be themselves is not just morally right, but makes good business sense too.

Participants in our focus groups also pointed to the role that the media and popular culture had played in navigating cultural change on gay rights. Celebrities like Ian McKellen and Martina Navratilova, popular soaps such as *EastEnders* featuring gay characters and shows which focused on the lives of LGBT people such as *The L Word* and *Will and Grace*, all played powerful roles in changing hearts and minds.

Of course, the path to gay equality is not complete. Nor has it been easy or without opposition. But it is a model for how the pace of cultural change can sometimes surprise even the champions of a cause. There are many lessons to be learnt from the success of efforts around issues such as same sex marriage. Campaigners deliberately sought to position debates around marriage equality in terms of how extending existing institutions to previously excluded groups would in fact strengthen them. Very little of the language or rhetoric was about tearing down, rewriting, or erasing what had come before. This approach could offer a path forward for campaigners seeking to find common ground on issues such as trans rights, which currently risk becoming stuck in culture war debates.

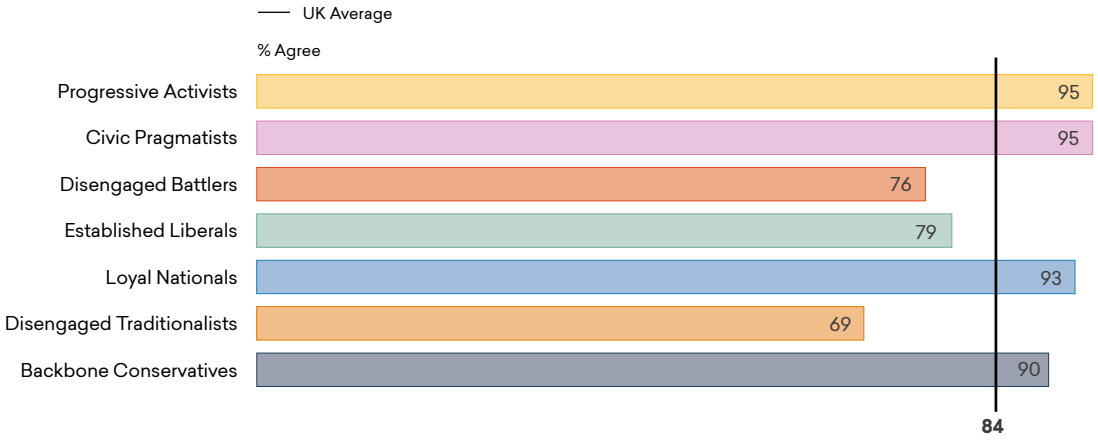
Lesson three: common resolve on climate and the environment

What is perhaps most striking about the changes in attitudes to nature and climate change, is that they have for the large part avoided falling into the culture wars discourse at all. Unlike in much of the rest of the English speaking world, there is a broad consensus in the UK that we need to do more to protect the environment and accept constraints on our way of life that allow us to do so.

Figure 15

Countryside and climate

Britons share a resolve to celebrate and respect our countryside



Question: Agree/Disagree: For millions of us, the outdoors has been a gift and a much-needed escape during the Coronavirus. As flooding, drought and coastal erosion become increasingly common, we need to celebrate the beauty of our countryside and do more to respect it. Source: More in Common, September 2020.

In part, it is a sense of common pride in our countryside and the common resolve to tackle climate change that insulates Britain from an eco-culture war. When asked about what has changed most in the past 20 years, Britons often think of our increased awareness of our environmental impact as a positive cultural change in Britain and one that unites us.

Anita, a Loyal National from Bristol, commented that a big change in the last 20 years was:

"There are more people that are environmentally aware. People are more worried about climate change. People are more concerned about the impact on the world, recycling, vegans, vegetarianism".

Rory, an Established Liberal from Bristol, reflected on the changes in behaviour on recycling:

"20 years ago, I wouldn't even have dreamed of it, it all went in one bag and that was it. Say goodbye to it, and that was it. Close the door on it. Now I go, "Oh, got to go put plastics in this. Got to do it."

Our recent focus groups highlighted the role of popular media in setting the tone and agenda for cultural change. More than 3 in 4 Britons (76 per cent) are likely to believe what they learn in documentaries – and one in two Britons trust David Attenborough to talk about climate change and protecting the environment. James, a Backbone Conservative, shared how he became a vegetarian a decade ago after watching a documentary on meat production. Hazel, another Backbone Conservative told us she knows if she watches 'Seaspriacy' she will stop eating fish – but is putting off watching because she loves fish too much. Those examples reflect a broader insight that when Britons think about culture change (and in this case, behaviour change), popular media plays a critically important role.

But media has not been the only force in leading cultural change on our relationship to nature and the environment. Many businesses have led the way in raising the profile of action on climate change as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts and a growing focus on the opportunities presented by the new investments required to achieve net zero carbon emissions. Parents and grandparents speak of learning about climate change and sustainability from what their children and grandchildren learn in school, a reflection of the role of educational institutions in helping to build a fact-based consensus.

As we continue on the transition towards net zero emissions, we will face very significant challenges to sustain consensus and public confidence in the fairness and burden-sharing of change. We will need to continue applying the lessons of past efforts focused on building common ground – avoiding more polarising approaches that may be well-intentioned but counter-productive.

Simon's Seat, Skipton, UK, 2020
Illiya Vjestica / Unsplash

Chapter 4
A common ground approach to culture change

4.1 The key role of educational institutions and workplaces

Leaders and institutions have a central role to play in helping societies navigate cultural change and avoid polarisation and conflict. The important role of political leaders, campaigners, advocates, civil society, and the popular media is regularly cited when reflecting on the process of cultural change. But an insight from the conversations with ordinary Britons is that with falling levels of trust in politicians, as well as the media and professional campaign groups, we need to consider the role that other institutions can play in strengthening common ground and helping us to navigate sometimes difficult periods of change.

The important role of **schools and colleges** should not be overlooked. On Twitter and in the broadsheet newspapers, universities garner most of the column inches in debates about culture, change, and free speech. But given that only half of young people attend university, focusing solely on higher education risks giving the impression that cultural issues are of less concern to the other half of young people who do not. This is not true. Findings from the Britain's Choice study show that non-graduates are just as likely to think that racism is a very serious problem in the UK as graduates, and more likely to say they take pride in Britain's history.

Rather than focusing on culture wars flare-ups in universities, our leaders would do better to focus on how to navigate change when more young people are together at an early age - in schools. Elite media coverage might ignore the role of schools, but Britons do not. Time and time again when talking about how best to mediate cultural change, conversations with ordinary Britons come back to schools and colleges. Almost everyone in the UK has been through school, and almost everyone has opinions about their experiences. Schools play a vital role in helping young people and their families deal with cultural change.

In all of our focus group conversations, we heard remarks about the crucial role schools play in instilling respect and tolerance in the next generation of Britons. Parents shared how their children are learning a more complete story about Britain's past. Some felt that schools could do better in creating spaces for children to be curious, ask questions, and also make mistakes as they deal with diversity and cultural change – rather than shut down discussion or avoid difficult issues. Participants in one group of Established Liberals and Civic Pragmatists were reassured when a participant who is a primary school teacher shared that learning respect and tolerance are central features of the curriculum. But the fact that they were not aware of this already is an example of how schools have more to do in consulting with parents and communicating their work on issues of cultural change and diversity.

Schools are natural environments of enquiry and therefore they enjoy a unique position in being able to help mediate cultural change and create the space for open and engaging discussion. In recent years, schools have more often than not found themselves on the frontline of navigating cultural change in Britain. From relationships and sex education, to religious diversity, and cultural representation in the curriculum, schools are constantly having to adapt and build on their teaching and policies to match the needs of the Britain of the day.

Doing that is not easy. But schools, colleges, and academy trusts know their own communities better than those in Westminster or the devolved administrations. They know how to consult with and engage parents, and tailor an approach that serves the needs of the local community. This community engagement is crucial. That is not to say that local communities should have a veto over what pupils learn, but rather that more often than not, they are more likely to be accepting of unfamiliar concepts if schools and colleges take time to talk and discuss with them. Often that process of dialogue leads to novel and creative ways of addressing cultural conflicts – for instance, some schools have drawn parallels in their teaching between homophobia and islamophobia as a way of securing buy-in from conservatively religious parents for teaching about sexual orientation. In doing so, they avoid creating the false binaries that other approaches to talking about prejudice and discrimination can take.

Occasionally schools' leaders make mistakes on these issues, and have to rethink. They should be commended for doing so – cultural change is by its nature dynamic and fluid, and in an environment where culture war arsonists seek to stoke every issue, finding the right approach can be difficult. There are however three traps that schools should try and avoid as they seek to navigate issues of cultural change and diversity:

- Firstly, schools can be tempted to listen to the loudest voices in the room on these issues, particularly when there are highly engaged – though unrepresentative – clusters among the parent body at one end of the spectrum on social issues. While a culture of engagement with parents is vital, schools must ensure they reach out to the whole school community and do not just listen to those who are most vocal. They should also be clear that teaching about issues such as the diversity of relationships and family life is non-negotiable. For example, schools have a duty to explain to more conservative parents that when their children leave school for the next stage of their education they will come into contact with people from different backgrounds and races, of different beliefs and sexual orientation, and this is part of their role in preparing young people for life.
- Secondly, while many charities and campaigning organisations have excellent resources to offer for schools, schools should also be conscious of avoiding importing one point of view – especially on live issues such as trans equality, building representative curricula, or striking the balance between free speech and religious tolerance, which remain the subject of cultural discussion and debate. Rather than allowing themselves to be pulled too far in either direction on these issues, schools should come back to their responsibility to help mould tolerant, respectful, and inquisitive citizens.
- Finally, schools should not inadvertently shut down complex debates or leave young people feeling they cannot ask questions. Such an approach is counter-intuitive and instead schools need to prepare pupils to navigate cultural change and to understand concepts like difference, identity, tradition, and progress. While they should take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying, and encourage respect for difference – they must also allow young people to feel like they can ask questions. It means encouraging, rather than seeking to expunge or sanitise.

Basically, the school said, when Matthew leaves after the holidays, he's coming back as Alex. Don't ask them any questions, because if you do, you'll be suspended. And it was all like, they weren't allowed to ask questions. So, then they've obviously got questions, because they're children. So rather than teaching them and educating them about it or having a class about it or something, they just said, don't ask any questions.

– Nigel, Loyal National, Manchester

Schools cannot avoid culture and cultural change, and they have a responsibility to help not just their students, but also their wider communities to navigate cultural change. Thankfully, the vast majority of schools do this well, and the very best show that it is something done through engagement, awareness building, and taking a whole school approach, rather than leaving 'tricky issues' as something to be done as a one-off.

None of this means that schools should be left alone to decide these issues independently and without government backing. Governments have a responsibility to set the framework for how schools should approach these issues, without politicising their role, while leaving sufficient discretion for schools to tailor their approach as they see fit. Crucially, where schools do take the time to consult and engage, and develop policies and approach to help navigate change, they need to know that they will receive the full backing of the Government and inspectorates, and local authorities, something that has not always been the case in recent years.

Alongside educational institutions, workplaces can play a key positive role in managing the process of cultural change. Briton's workplaces have long been cultural and social melting pots – for many people they might be the only space where they meet and interact with people who are different to them. That places a premium on businesses creating the sorts of environment that facilitate respect for difference both of backgrounds and opinions. At the same time, beyond their immediate workplaces, businesses often play a major role in the cultural debates of the day – from tackling climate change to racial inequality to social mobility.

The most successful businesses recognise that this cultural leadership role is not separate but integral to their core business. Cohesive societies make for happier more productive staff. People perform best in the workplace when they feel able to be themselves. Diverse workplaces make it easier to spot talent. Customers are more likely to show brand loyalty to those firms that show cultural leadership on issues such as climate.

So many will only do something if they have to do it and they're told to do it...politicians and businesses have to show the way.

– Li, Disengaged Traditionalist, Cambridge

I do trust business leaders because they have got their finger on the pulse. They've not been elected. They've worked their way up to that position and I admire that in people, I really do admire it.

– Geoff, Disengaged Battler, Scotland

On gender equality, in particular, firms have worked not just to identify and nurture female talent and champion female role models, but also to try to address some of the structural barriers to women succeeding by ensuring flexible working and better access to childcare. While progress on gender equality in the workplace isn't complete, the top ranks of major employers are a far cry from the male-dominated management structures that are within living memory of people still in the workforce today – a major cultural shift that has happened in a relatively short space of time, in no small part thanks to the role of employers themselves.

Of course, firms can often become the focus of cultural conflict. In our focus group conversations, some told us that too often diversity training was treated like a tick box exercise with little room for discussion and or space to ask questions – something which ultimately bred more resentment. In fact, only 37 per cent of Britons feel comfortable expressing their political viewpoints at work (compared to 70 per cent feeling comfortable talking politics with friends, and 75 per cent feeling free to discuss politics with their family).[11] The recent Maya Forstater case[12] is an example of the difficult line that firms often have to tread between allowing open and frank exchanges of views and preventing minorities from being subject to hostile environments. However, the wrong way to respond to these challenges is to ban any discussion of complex or controversial issues. Instead, firms should use their diversity work to discuss boundaries about what is and is not acceptable and to create the space to challenge and ask questions.

There is also a risk that firms' corporate social responsibility (CSR) work can appear tokenistic and not substantive – such as the Marks and Spencer's LGBT sandwich, which reduced complex issues of equality to a re-branded bacon sandwich. At worst, some CSR efforts can inflame cultural tensions – such as the pre-emptive advertising boycott of GB News by a group of companies, before the channel had even launched. Other firms resisted activist pressure for a pre-emptive boycott and vowed to judge GB News based on their output – a more measured and evidenced-based approach. There are risks when businesses, or schools and other institutions, adopt wholesale the perspectives of campaign groups. Listening to the views of all of the stakeholders can help in finding more nuanced common ground responses.

Businesses that successfully navigate cultural change do so by taking the opportunity to reflect and consider the nuances of the issue at hand. Organisations that model effective engagement with cultural issues of diversity and awareness are better able to get the best out of their staff and to increase awareness rather than closing down debate. They also approach these issues from a position of wanting to attract the best talent and be responsible corporate citizens, while recognising that disadvantage and social inequity comes in many forms including class, as well as characteristics protected by the Equality Act. In doing so, they play a vital role in helping to steward cultural change.

11 Source: More in Common-MHPC, January 2021, N = 2,107

12 Maya Forstater v CGD Europe and Others: UKEAT/0105/20/JOJ

4.2 A common ground approach to cultural change: a plan for the future

Listening to the voices of ordinary Britons provides fresh and more hopeful approaches to how we can navigate cultural change and build resilience against the divisive efforts of culture wars arsonists.

A key insight from those voices is that most people are more nuanced and complex than the caricatures framed in culture wars narratives. The notion of a reactionary Red Wall across the North and Midlands of England, desperate to turn back the clock to the 1950s, is as inaccurate as the sketch of metropolitan citizens of nowhere determined to pull down every vestige of Britain's heritage. People approach these cultural flashpoints based on their own life experiences and values, and most do this in terms of the issue at hand, rather than adopting the tribal approach of cultural provocateurs.

Most people recognise that our identity and culture is constantly evolving, even as it is rooted in qualities that have endured through generations of sweeping economic, social, and technological change. Listening to Backbone Conservatives talking about how much they enjoy watching RuPaul's Drag Race UK, it is quickly apparent that change is continuing: there is no silent majority harking back to a supposed good old day. Indeed, those changes can quickly become a source of pride – such as we have seen with the change in public opinion on gay rights in the past thirty years.

Throughout our conversations, the role of societal leaders in helping to steward such changes has been highlighted. Even in the context of deep distrust of politicians, people speak positively of the role they have played in helping to bring about changes in attitudes on gay rights, alongside campaigners, the arts and television, schools and colleges, businesses and even the media.

From conversations with the public, it is hard not to conclude that the reason that change was embraced by the public was as much about the manner by which that change was brought about, as it was about the cause of gay rights itself. By positioning debates around marriage equality in terms of strengthening existing institutions by extending those institutions, by previously excluded groups, they made a case for both continuity and change – a key lesson for future efforts.

That approach speaks to the manner in which Britons expect our country to approach social change. It was clear from our conversations that many Brits recoil from divisive and polarising debates in other countries, which become disorderly and violent. Britons want disagreements dealt with through open but respectful discussion. Indeed, while it might seem clichéd, when we asked one group what distinguished the 'British way of doing things' 'queuing' was the first thing anyone mentioned. That is not to say that change cannot happen quickly, or that campaigners have to 'wait their turn', but rather Britons want debates to be conducted with civility, order, respect and in a way that informs, rather than polarises.

This desire for a 'British approach to cultural change' is something that the leaders and institutions in British society would do well to heed. The public does not think leaders are rising to the mark by engaging in elite, headline-grabbing culture wars, rather than sensitively stewarding the process of cultural change.

Our conversations with the British public, along with the case studies of previous cultural changes in Britain, highlight seven insights for leaders in navigating cultural identity and change in a way that is good for society and meets the public's expectations.

Seven recommendations for Britain's leaders

One

Leaders should not accept the way that debates are often framed in shorthand reporting of culture wars.

There is no desire in Britain to import cultural frames from the USA. Of course, elements of our culture are now global; there is no doubt that the murder of George Floyd resonated here in the UK as well as in America. But the way in which we approach these issues and the context in which they are being received clearly differs. Politicians, campaigners for social justice, leaders of national institutions, and even business leaders need to recognise those differences and engage with cultural issues as they affect the UK, not the US.

In practice that means recognising that there is not a binary cultural division to be exploited for political expediency or which means writing off half of the public as unreachable. Most Britons are proud of the cultural change that has taken place in their lifetimes, but also have a sense of pride in our cultural heritage. Leaders should recognise that Britons do not have 'stacked identities' and instead engage with cultural issues on a case-by-case basis. Britons often have a surprising amount of common ground, and they want to see disagreements resolved rather than a vicious cycle of intensifying conflict. That, after all, was a significant part of the appeal in the promise to 'get Brexit done', which contributed to the decisive result in the 2019 General Election.

Politicians in particular would do well to recognise that the public expects them to focus their time, energy, and resources on the issues that matter most to ordinary Britons. The public recognises that university students do silly things and that campaigners adopt attention-seeking tactics. They do not want our politicians to overreact and play up divisions in response. Much of the public is genuinely baffled when they see politicians and the media prioritising airtime and column inches on these 'spats', rather than the burning injustices they want to see tackled in our society.

Yeah, definitely. I'd be very worried if university campuses all had well behaved, very middle of the line attendees.

– Graham, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside

Just ignore [culture wars]. Because I think they do these things just for attention, and everybody goes along. And it doesn't really matter. There's more important things to worry about.

– Laurena, Loyal National, Tyneside

Two

Leaders should recognise the need to create the space for people to discuss, question and even challenge change, rather than throwing rhetorical grenades into an echo chamber.

Those campaigning for social change will be more likely to succeed if they create an environment where people can ask questions and personally consider the issues at hand. Britons tell us they do not like having to worry about saying or doing the wrong thing when it comes to cultural change, preferring instead to be able to ask 'silly questions' and learn from mistakes. Approaches to cultural change that either appear too sensitive to genuine ignorance or too eager to pillory those still adjusting, are far more likely to lead to retrenchment and hostility. Chastising those with honest questions often only serves to push them into a group that becomes resentful of being silenced or ashamed. Instead, the best campaigns take an approach that allows people to question and even challenge. There is a particular need to focus attention on managing differences between generations here, and the different paces at which the old and young approach and accept cultural change.

Yeah, I think I just needs a bit more clarification of what [taking the knee] actually means.

– Dean, Disengaged Traditionalist, Bristol

I think, is all this snowflake and woke or whatever these words are, all started. You will offend people if you don't say the right things. You know what I mean?

– Tommy, Loyal National, Stoke

Much of the debate about space for discussion focuses on universities, ignoring the fact that 50 per cent of the country, who also care deeply about our culture, do not go to university. Starting at 18 is far too late to encourage a culture of civil debate and mutual respect. Instead, it is our schools and colleges that could be our most powerful tool in extinguishing the flames of conflict before they take root. In this regard our schools play a vital role in introducing and encouraging a culture of respectful enquiry and ability to appreciate the points of others. For young people, school will be a time when they are introduced to the 'other', people who look, act, and think differently to them. As one of the few institutional experiences which just about all of us share, schools have a powerfully positive role in fostering understanding and preparing young citizens for a world where the capacity to embrace both continuity and change will be critical. That means taking a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and encouraging respect for difference – but also allowing young people to feel like they can ask questions. It also means encouraging rather than shutting down respectful discussion, and using the curriculum to encourage a culture of critical enquiry, rather than seeking to expunge or sanitise.

I think with racism and all those sort of things, a lot of these things are bred from people being ignorant. And it's what they don't know. People are scared of what they don't know. And I think a lot of schools don't handle those situations correctly.

– Nigel, Loyal National, Manchester

Schools will also have to introduce young people to concepts that may be alien or even unwelcome to their parents and communities. The best schools navigate these tensions through a process of engagement and consultation, not giving groups a veto, but thinking about how issues can be introduced sensitively in a way that draws parallels and commonality rather than othering. The same approach should apply to schools' dealings with campaign groups, while many offer excellent resources and suggestions for building a culture of inclusion, schools should ensure that they are not inadvertently importing one particular view point on issues which remain live cultural debates.

Three

Leaders should focus contributions to debates less on responding the voices and arguments of small groups who dominate social media and polarise debates.

They should instead focus on reinforcing an accurate reflection of reality. While calling out prejudice and discrimination is vitally important, in doing so leaders must avoid allowing the actions of a vocal minority to appear representative of wider attitudes. Occasionally, well-meaning efforts to challenge offensive views can amplify those views out of all proportion. Cultural arsonists thrive in an environment where every provocation meets with a response. Very often those responses inadvertently frame the issues as one of 'two sides', allowing provocateurs to claim the legitimacy of representing one side of a binary debate. Rather than falling into the cultural arsonists' trap, the better response can often be to showcase the views of the tolerant, compassionate majority rather than going to war against a tiny fringe. The striking imagery of hundreds of people in Manchester using their personal tributes and expressions of support to cover graffiti on a mural of footballer Marcus Rashford is a powerful case in point.

I think it's best just to ignore it. Nothing's going to happen, just let it go. I don't think you should have got involved.

– Lorna, Disengaged Traditionalist, Tyneside

Four

Leaders should, in communicating about issues of difference and cultural change, use language that is concrete and accessible to the majority of people.

The use of abstract principles or dividing lines that dominate on social media does not resonate beyond it and can end up creating a sense of alienation between ordinary people and elites. Talking about change in terms of real stories and relationships is what encourages support for cultural change, more so than the language of intersectionality or privilege. Dealing with real people and real stories does not easily sit with the desire to craft a punchy one liner, or viral tweets, but it is likely to lead to much richer engagement on the issues at hand.

'I do have difficulty trying to keep up with the labels that are being hung on people. And you suddenly get all these new acronyms coming out. You suddenly get different language coming out and being used. And it's very, very difficult to keep up with it'

– Claude, Loyal National, Brighton

Gareth Southgate's 'Dear England' letter is in many ways an exemplar of this approach. In the face of abuse being directed at England players for taking the knee, and racist trolling on social media, he used the essay as an opportunity to link the importance of his team's life experiences, pride in playing for England, and privileged position to the need to stand up against racial injustice.

'Don't forget, many of our lads started out at Football League clubs like Barnsley, MK Dons and Sheffield United. Their backgrounds are humble. For them to make it to this point as one of the chosen few in England's history ... well, it simply doesn't happen without pride.'

'I have never believed that we should just stick to football..... It's their duty to continue to interact with the public on matters such as equality, inclusivity and racial injustice, while using the power of their voices to help put debates on the table, raise awareness and educate.'

All the while the letter loops back to a wider message about the power of football in the nation's cultural discourse.

'I think about all the young kids who will be watching this summer, filling out their first wall charts. No matter what happens, I just hope that their parents, teachers and club managers will turn to them and say, "Look. That's the way to represent your country. That's what England is about. That is what's possible."

Polls taken during the Euro 2020 tournament showed that Southgate has a higher approval rating than Churchill. Support for actions such as taking the knee (having already started from majority support) grew during the tournament. No doubt the former of these was in no small part related to Southgate leading the England team to their most successful tournament since 1966, rather than a real comparison between the England Manager and our most respected Prime Minister. But the power of Southgate's letter came from the fact that he used his national leadership position to help navigate cultural change, rooted in the real-life experience of the squad he manages.

If it's people in the limelight, whether it is politicians or celebrities or whatever, they've got the ability to share it to thousands or millions more people than what the average person does. So yeah, I do think they should get involved.

– Katrina, Disengaged Battler, Bristol

Five

Leaders should focus on tangible actions rather than symbolism or fights about words.

A strong theme from conversations with the public was that they are much more interested in tangible change, than rhetoric or symbolic gestures. While they are, broadly, happy to support acts of solidarity whether its footballers taking the knee, or clapping for carers, they want to see those actions followed

up with action and delivery. In a similar way, Britons place a premium on change being forward looking – they want our history to be taught honestly and three dimensionally – but they are far more interested in hearing from our leaders about what we do today to make Britain a better place than hearing endless repetitive debates about statues.

Many businesses are keen to show their support for social justice movements that reflect their values. There is no doubt that businesses display of support during pride month, or against racial injustice, can help to engender a feeling of solidarity – but Britons want to know what these businesses are doing practically. Gestures like the "LGBT" sandwich are more likely to meet with derision than support. Instead, the more practical efforts and plans that firms have put in place – for instance on transitioning to net zero, or tackling the gender pay gap, are the yardsticks with which Britons will judge tangible progress and change.

> **Taking down a picture of the Queen is not going to stop the fact that if you're black, a black boy's seven times more likely to be expelled from school. If you've got an ethnic sounding name and you're sending your CV out, you're much more likely not to get any of the sponsors...so maybe we need to concentrate on some of the institutional forms of racism.**
>
> *– Emily, Disengaged Battler, Leeds*

Six
Leaders should establish inclusive processes that allow us to successfully navigate cultural flashpoints.

Currently too much of the debate over cultural change is conducted in environments designed to promote division and false binaries. This contributes to a sense of conflict and the feeling that the outcomes of cultural debates will always be zero-sum. Instead, more thinking needs to be done about how genuine concerns can be expressed in a climate of respect for different views, based on acknowledging others' best intentions. The design of these processes should harness valuable insights from conflict resolution. Experts, from a range of backgrounds and viewpoints, should be convened to critically assess the issues at hand. They should in turn create opportunities for a wide range of people to be able to have their say, while also preventing the escalation of conflict and overreaction to intentional provocations. They should identify common ground and practical solutions. Critically, these processes need to be conducted in ways that build public confidence.

While these processes could take place locally and in institutions, there is a positive opportunity for the Government to take the lead in designing and implementing the approach for cultural flash points that sit at the national level. That could start with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Government Equalities Office appointing expert panels to find practical, common ground approaches that can defuse conflict around current cultural debates. It is important that the Government learns from the experience of the Sewell Commission on Race and Ethnic disparities, which missed the opportunity for building a broad consensus because it was perceived to advance a particular ideological viewpoint. Instead, these panels should genuinely reflect the diversity of opinion on the issues under consideration. One way to achieve this would be through appointments made on a cross-party basis. The panels and their decisions should be independent of Government and their deliberations accessible to the public. They should also ensure that

they take evidence from a broad cross-section of society. Debates around trans-equality and reform of the Gender Recognition Act, along with our cultural heritage and statues, would be sensible priority areas for this more deliberative, inclusive approach.

I don't think there actually seems to be much forum for proper discussion about stuff actually. There's Twitter where you get everybody ranting off. They'd probably come home and have a bad night and just spatting off at everybody. But for all this communication we've got, I don't know that it really necessarily allows for a whole lot of honesty and proper discussion about stuff.

– Tanya, Backbone Conservative, London

My mum rang me and was like, "Why is it? I don't get it, all lives matter." And I was like, "Yeah, but no one's killing white people at the moment. They are just killing black people. That's why it's Black Lives Matter." So that was a conversation I had face-to-face with a family member, but as soon as I explained it, luckily enough, my mum was like, "Oh yeah, I didn't think of it like that."

So I don't mind having those conversations with people who literally just, it's really innocent there's no harm behind it.

– Katrina, Disengaged Battler, Bristol

Seven

Tech giants must do more than window-dressing to address the negative effects of their platforms.

In almost all of our conversations, participants criticised social media companies for exacerbating divides and creating a culture of intolerance. Some participants now avoid social media entirely as a result. Others mentioned following debates online, but being too scared to comment. This is a shame as we also heard powerful examples of how social media could be a force for good – such as the Loyal National, in one of our focus groups, who during lockdown brought people together to overcome loneliness across the country through a 'virtual pub' on Facebook. Overall, the public's assessment of the role of new tech platforms in our public discourse is scathing. There is a clear lesson here for social media companies: as they establish themselves as the newest stewards of how we engage and communicate with each other, they must do more to help smooth the public discourse rather than distorting it. Whether it is through algorithms exploring pro-social rather than anti-social tendencies in our psychology, or through changed community settings and platform rules, the public expect social media companies to begin playing a positive rather than incendiary role in the debate about social change. If they do not do that by choice, public pressure for regulation of tech giants will become overwhelming.

I think it [social media] is responsible for a lot of negative things with no responsibility behind it.

– Anita, Loyal National, London

Social media and the internet has got a huge amount to answer for, a massive amount.

– Phil, Loyal National, London

Failure of leadership has consequences

Britain's leaders can of course respond to efforts to intensify cultural conflict with a collective shrug, or seek to exploit divisions for their own gain. But the failure of leadership on cultural wars has real consequences. Already the public feels let down by political leaders, whom they blame for the sense that the country today is divided. At best, more and more of the public will switch off and disengage from the national discourse. Given we are starting from already profound levels of distrust (84 per cent of Britons feel that politicians do not care what they think), the consequences of further disengagement will only further people's feelings of alienation from those in positions of power and influence.

But at its worst, what is currently still a debate largely confined to elites could spill out into something more serious. While Britain is not America, we are susceptible to American cultural exports, good and bad. The 2021 by-election in Batley and Spen was a far cry from the usual British tradition of robust, but respectful politics. Instead, debates about LGBT education in schools, India, and Palestine, spilled out into harassment and even physical intimidation and violence. That such a campaign took place in the same seat where a Member of Parliament was murdered by a far-right extremist only five years earlier, underscores the seriousness of the threat of deepening divisions and online extremism.

A less chilling, but certainly pernicious effect of prosecuting culture wars is the extent to which they suck so much of the oxygen out of important policy debates, making progress on tackling societal problems impossible. Take for example the 2021 Education Select committee report on the important topic of educational underperformance among white working-class communities. As a direct result of the briefing accompanying the report – blaming these disadvantages on the use of the concept of 'white privilege' – what resulted was an unedifying row over a single phrase, instead of a nuanced discussion around the report's analysis and policy recommendations. Serious policies – like improving parents' literacy and numeracy, or better targeting apprenticeship funding took a back seat to culture war rhetoric. There are countless other examples – whether it was the Sewell Report on Race and Ethnic Disparities, its 258 pages and 24 recommendations for tackling racial inequality, lost as partisans dug into a debate about the phrase 'systemic racism', or the debate about trans equality which instead of focusing on the many areas of public consensus, such as access to health care, instead centres on the cancelling or not of one of the nation's best loved children's authors. Time and time again, culture wars are where the ability to make progress on serious policy matters is lost in conflict.

And while other policy debates such as climate, or the levelling up agenda, have so far proved immune to being pulled into the culture wars, we only have to look to America or parts of the Continent to see how unless our leaders step back from the culture wars, these too could follow suit – with the result that vital progress on both will stall.

The price of our leaders dragging the public unwillingly into a culture war could be a dear one for both social cohesion and social progress. But even the short-term benefits that culture war arsonists perceive they will get may not be all that they seem. In fact, there are very real ways in which culture wars can and do backfire on both sides of the divide.

For those on the right, the public might agree with them on issues of national pride and identity, but also question why politicians artificially manufacture debates on these issues. In some cases this spills over into frustration at a focus on culture wars rather than tackling the burning injustices of the day. It is possible to end up on the wrong side of a culture war – as those MPs who

criticised the England team ahead of the 2020 Euros found out. Exploiting insecurities about cultural change can obviously reap short term dividends, but there are countless of these examples where the winning side of the culture war today can easily become the losing side tomorrow, leaving those who have prosecuted culture wars on the right seeming oddly out of place with public opinion.

For those on the left, demands for change that rally activist bases on Twitter can alienate the public at large. The wider public is acutely sensitive to others looking down upon them, and judging them for not using words with which they are not familiar. Efforts that to some aim to exclude prejudice and exclusion, to many can feel like an effort to shut down debate. Successful social justice movements are borne out of deep frustration with the status quo and the experience of discrimination, injustice and suffering, but they build broad coalitions that only come about through sustained efforts at persuasion and base-broadening. An all-or-nothing approach to social progress will not secure the base of public support required for progress.

For leaders of all kinds who want to solve problems and build a more healthy democracy and cohesive society, the flames of the culture wars can be a threat that encourages them to just keep their heads down and avoid engagement. But this is wishful thinking, and a failure of leadership. Given the temptation for others to continue inflaming the culture wars, credible and effective leadership is all the more important from all parts of society – to step up to the plate and restore public confidence that we can manage our disagreements, and navigate change in ways true to ourselves and our values, and strengthen a society facing the prospect of accelerating changes in the years ahead.

Conclusion

Cultural change is not new to Britain, nor are debates about those changes, or even trenchant disagreements. What is changing is public confidence in our ability to manage those differences and disagreements. Rather than the British tradition of considering and reflecting on cultural change, a group of cultural arsonists in politics, activism, and the media have instead chosen to ignite cultural conflicts. These arsonists are not interested in changing hearts and minds, or building a big tent for social change, but instead care only about the approval of their peer group and responses to their provocations. Their influence has spread from the echo chambers of social media to our newspapers and TV studios to our national institutions and universities, so that it now laps at the door of the institutions that make up our everyday lives - our schools, colleges, and workplaces.

Resetting the narrative and reframing our approach to the process of cultural change will require visible and concerted leadership from across society. It will mean politicians, campaigners, media outlets as well as civic leaders, schools, employers, and sports clubs playing their part. The challenge they will face in beating back the flames of cultural conflict will not be easy in a world of 280 characters, where everyone has a microphone and the temptation to split every disagreement into 'two sides', throws accelerant onto the culture wars. But as this paper shows, there are two fundamental reasons for optimism.

The first is that Britain has a long history of navigating cultural change that is embedded in our national psyche. Issues that once seemed insurmountable, now barely cause the batting of an eyelid. From gay rights to gender equality, from religious tolerance to our treatment of the disabled, and a host of others, Britain has seen changes not just in laws and legislation but in hearts and minds too. Nowhere in 2021 do we see that more clearly than in the role of England's football team in changing our national discourse about race and English identity. Marcus Rashford, Bukayo Saka and Jadon Sancho's responses to the racist abuse they have faced are powerful examples of how leaders can set and shift the terms of our national debate.

The second is that Britons are not yearning for a culture war either. 'Stacked identities' that see people adhere to tribal patterns of belief and behaviour are not reflective of where the British public are. Instead, Britons are a nation of balancers, seeking to find the middle road through seemingly polarised conflicts. When we spoke to them about cultural flash points that have dominated headlines in recent years, most responded with nuance, enquiry, and a genuine desire to find a way through. Once you move away from binary polling questions to actual conversations, the idea that we are a nation split into those who support tearing down statues and those who do not, those who support taking the knee and those who do not, and those who support free speech and those who advocate cancel culture, simply does not ring true.

Britain's leaders should take heart from both of these facts, and it should strengthen their resolve to tackle cultural conflict. Rather than fuelling conflict or burying their heads in the sand, Britain's leaders need to step up. That means understanding how different groups approach issues of cultural conflict, meeting them where they are, and creating an environment where people can question, make mistakes, and come together. It means moving away from abstract and often alienating language and instead talking in ways that connect across the board. It means recognising the power of symbolism, alongside the need to take action. It means not just listening or responding to the loudest voices in the room, but engaging everyone in conversations about Britain's future.

One of the most important tests of leadership in the 2020s is whether our leaders can navigate flashpoints and differences, not by ignoring, provoking, or obscuring, but by finding solutions and balance. As the current stewards of our nation's culture and heritage, it is time for Britain's leaders to step up to the plate, to resist the import of fundamentally un-British framings or conflicts, and to instead, create the space for handling cultural change that properly reflects our norms and heritage. The prize of a more cohesive, better connected and more understanding society, is there - Britain's leaders need to be bold enough to make the choice to reach for it.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