

LABOUR

TOGETHER

Culture Clash

Bridging Our Divides

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About the Author

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About British Future

British Future is an independent, non-partisan thinktank and registered charity engaging with people's hopes and fears about integration and migration, identity and race, so that we share a confident and welcoming Britain, inclusive and fair to all.

www.britishfuture.org

About Labour Together

In Labour's wilderness years, Labour Together was built by a group of MPs fighting to make the party electable again: Steve Reed, Shabana Mahmood, Lucy Powell, Wes Streeting, Bridget Philipson, Jim McMahon, Jon Cruddas, Lisa Nandy and Rachel Reeves.

In 2020, Labour Together helped unite the party behind Sir Keir Starmer's leadership campaign. Now committed to seeing Labour back in power, Labour Together is a political think tank, putting forward a new vision for Britain under a Keir Starmer administration.

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As a non-partisan think-tank and charity, British Future is committed to engaging across all mainstream political parties and traditions with constructive advice about how to address issues of identity to foster a stronger sense of the common ground in Britain.

Politicians and parties from the left, the centre and the right will face parallel challenges and distinct pressures in navigating changing issues of identity in Britain today as they seek the trust of citizens to govern our country. This joint report for Labour Together unpacks how Labour and the centre-left can navigate issues of identity and make constructive progress on social change while reducing rather than exacerbating polarisation. In the year ahead of a general election, the choices that party leaders, MPs and their supporters make will affect not only their own political prospects but also the broader culture of politics and society. I hope this short report offers useful advice on how Labour voices at all levels of the party and movement can navigate political and societal challenges and contribute to a more constructive public conversation about identity and change in our country.

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Sunder Katwala, September 2023

Part One

Bridging the Gap

How divided are we?

Today, Britain is more divided than any of us want. But, somewhat paradoxically, it is also less divided than we have begun to tell ourselves. This paper intends to play a small part in understanding the true scale of division in Britain today, and – ultimately – in reducing it.

By international standards, Britain has only middling levels of cultural and identity conflict. Our society is far less polarised than that of the United States, for instance, where identity separates the nation on almost every major issue, be that policing or the covid pandemic. Looking closer to home, we are also far less divided than France, where debates about migration, integration, race and faith are vehement, vitriolic and sometimes even violent.

But when we think about identity and cultural conflict, we do not think comparatively. As British Future has shown over many years, most people in Britain think of themselves as ‘balancers’, representing a society in which we respect the views of those we disagree with.

Sadly, our recent politics has not lived up to this self-image. To those who live here, Britain feels more divided than it should be. The 2016 EU referendum was an argument about a specific question: whether to remain in the EU or to leave it. By a thin margin, it divided the nation. But how people answered that question also illuminated deeper divides in society – between nations and regions, towns and cities, races and classes.

Brexit did not create these divisions, but it did exacerbate them. Two new political identities – Remainers and Leavers – grew up and apart from each other. While those identities are now weakening, the underlying differences are apparent across any number of issues, including race, history, empire, asylum, immigration and human rights.

In different moods, and on different days, the Labour Party and the progressive left has both exaggerated and underestimated the amount of cultural conflict in Britain. On other occasions, particularly when comparing Britain to the United States, complacency has crept in.

Both are misguided. By panicking, we accept that there is little we can do to bridge our divides. Complacency, meanwhile, is perilous. A Labour Party that crosses its fingers and hopes for less polarised politics will find itself dragged into fight after fight, always unprepared. These are difficult debates about substantive issues, and they require considered and active interventions. This paper intends to set out how that can be achieved.

Is this a 'culture war'?

When talking about divisions of culture and identity, the term 'culture wars' leaps to our lips. But before we accept the definition, we should ask whether it is really justified.

To do that, we should start with the sociologist who first defined the term, some thirty years ago. James Davison Hunter, an American sociologist, is clear about the depth of division required for the use of the term. Writing in 2021, soon after the storming of the Capitol building in Washington DC, he said:

"Civil wars happen when irreconcilable differences prove impossible to resolve through peaceful political means. Culture wars always precede shooting wars. They don't necessarily lead to a shooting war, but you never have a shooting war without a culture war prior to it, because culture provides the justifications for violence."¹

If we take the term 'culture wars' seriously, as this paper argues we must, then there is clearly no culture war in Britain today. There are no divides that are so irreconcilable that they justify violence. Our differences can still be resolved through peaceful means.

However, that doesn't mean that our differences are not significant. While we do not have culture wars in Britain, we do have culture *clashes*. This report intends to address these clashes before they escalate to a full-blown culture war.

To do so, we must accept that these clashes are indeed real. Historically, some Labour supporters have argued that our cultural divides can simply be "called off", characterising them as nothing but a Conservative ploy. This is fundamentally misguided. Cultural and identity conflict is a real and increasingly salient part of our democratic politics, not simply the creation of social conservatives. Those who consider cultural divides to be invented should note that many on the right accuse the left of doing the very same thing. Many social conservatives today believe that it is the so-called "woke" left which starts identity battles - over issues like pronouns and statues - before calling conservatives "culture warriors" if they disagree.

These two narratives might play well with certain sections of each party's internal audience, but they do little more than that. While some voices are of course beyond the pale, nobody gets far by telling all their opponents to stop disagreeing with them.

¹'How the 'Culture War' Could Break Democracy' (Politico, May 2021), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/05/20/culture-war-politics-2021-democracy-analysis-489900>

Building bridges

When the left has decided to engage with clashes over identity and culture in the past, three instincts have tended to compete. While each contains grains of truth, none is sufficient alone.

The first instinct is to avoid debates about culture and identity entirely, considering them a distraction from higher priority issues such as the economy, public services and social inequality. This instinct casts identity issues as a political trap, designed to split Labour's electoral coalition by class and education, race and ethnicity, and place.

The second instinct is to concede. In this case, the usual recommendation is that the Labour leadership should challenge their membership's socially liberal views, encouraging them to respect the cultural identities of those who see the world differently to them and adopt their views.

The third instinct is in direct contrast to the second. Here, the left defends its progressive principles over issues of identity and culture. This holds that if Labour is seen to concede, it will lose its progressive base while appearing inauthentic to all voters.

Running through each of these approaches is the assumption that identity issues demand a trade-off between votes and values. This report takes a different position. It argues that Labour must instead commit itself to a strategy that is both principled and proactive, and that doing so can heal our divisions.

This is possible because questions of identity do not have to cause a clash between votes and values. This report will show that where there are divides, Labour can bridge them, because there is more room for agreement than is widely supposed.

The idea of bridge building is essential to this approach and the metaphor is important. Bridges span opposites. They bring two sides together, while allowing each to remain separate. Bridge building encourages people to recognise their differences while also finding a common ground. In the process, neither side needs to surrender its values. Conflict is acknowledged and not disguised. We meet in the middle, finding that the majority – coming from both sides - are willing to do so.

To understand the distinction between conceding and bridging, consider how the last Labour government addressed the contested issue of crime. Progressive values on criminal justice dictate that a government should focus its efforts on prevention and rehabilitation. More socially conservative voters take a different view, believing that the justice system exists primarily to protect victims by punishing criminals. Tony Blair's famous phrase, "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime", is an instructive example of how bridging can unite these two views and those who sit between them. Rather than abandoning progressive values, it sets them within a structure that listens to and addresses the desires of those who wish to prevent and those who wish to punish. And, perhaps most

importantly, it appeals to a ‘balancer’ middle who believe that we need a bit of both. Building bridges on issues of culture and identity isn't always as easy as this example makes it look, but the underlying approach is instructive.

In this report, we show that bridge building on cultural and identity issues is still possible in Britain today. To do so, we first offer an approach to bridging culture clashes in general terms. We then demonstrate how to apply this to some of the most hotly contested issues. Though we cannot resolve every contentious issue set out in this report, we can at least set a direction of travel.

In doing so, this paper draws on a decade of research and public engagement into identity issues conducted by British Future.² It also examines how insights from this research, and similar studies by others,³ can inform the choices made by decision-makers, opinion formers and active participants in progressive politics.

Issues of identity are hotly contested within and beyond the left. This report will not set out an approach that everybody will agree with. However, it aims to reach across a broad majority of Labour opinion, including MPs, party members, current Labour voters, and those who might vote Labour in the future. We also hope this report will be of interest to broader civic audiences of campaigners, specifically those who see the value of alliances in national politics and who believe in defusing, and not encouraging, polarisation.

² British Future, *How to Talk About Immigration*, 2014; British Future/Hope Not Hate, *National Conversation on Immigration*, 2018; British Future, *Many Rivers Crossed: Britain's attitudes to race and immigration 50 years after Rivers of Blood*, 2018; British Future, *Calling Our Hatred and Prejudice; a guide to communications, planning and messaging*, 2019; British Future, *Beyond a 90 minute nation*, 2020; British Future, *Race and Opportunity in Britain: Finding Common Ground*, 2020; Together Coalition and British Future, *Our Chance to Reconnect: Talk Together*, 2020.

³ Accessible research on social polarisation include: the Fear and Hope series from Hope Not Hate, 2011-2022, including Hope Not Hate, *Fear and Hope*, 2022); More in Common, *Britain's Choice*, 2020; Neon Project, *Divide and Rule*, 2021; Alex Evans, Larger Us, *Building a Larger Us: five questions for change-makers*, 2021; Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding, Fabian Society, *Counter-Culture: How to resist the culture wars and build 21st century solidarity*, 2021; Alison Goldsworthy, Laura Osborne and Alexandra Chesterfield, King's College Policy Unit / Engage Britain, *Poles Apart: Why people turn against each other and how to bring them together*, 2021; King's College Policy Unit, *Divided Britain*, 2020.

De-escalating our culture clashes

For obvious electoral reasons, Labour must not allow itself to become distanced from the values and principles that predominate in society. Doing so could see the party become the out-of-touch caricature its political opponents so gleefully describe.

For the Labour Party to govern, it must unite a broad coalition of voters, including those who occupy very different positions on questions of identity and culture. In April 2023, Labour Together published *Red Shift*⁴, an analysis of the voter groups who Labour must win in order to gain power. This clearly showed that while the voter coalition that Labour requires is united by their left-leaning attitudes to the economy, they are far more dispersed on social and cultural issues.

However, if cast as a trade-off between values and votes, sacrificing the former in pursuit of the latter, culture clashes will tear Labour apart. Labour values matter. Progress in tackling race discrimination, advancing gender equality and gay rights needed political parties to lead opinion, not just follow it. In every one of these cases, it was the Labour Party that led the way.

If Labour is to build a bridge on issues of culture, therefore, it must show that bridging divides is consistent with Labour values, not a concession of them. In fact, bridging is the very essence of Labour values, seeking to unite and not divide. To do so, this paper sets out five steps that are essential to principled depolarisation:

1. Make the ethical case for bridging divides, not just the electoral one

To live together in a democracy with citizens who have different values and identities requires that we listen with empathy and humility. Our goal should be to understand and learn from others, not to overcome them. We must keep alive the possibility that our own instincts are wrong and that others, no matter their background or beliefs, may have insights we are unable to access. Democracy is a practice as well as a political system. Free and open conversation is its lifeblood: not just debating one's fellow citizen, but listening and feeling what they feel. Labour was once described as the "political wing of the British people". For that to be true, it must advance its values and positions by listening to and building support among the voters who elect it, not by lecturing or lambasting them.

2. Engage rather than avoid - but separate substance from symbolism

Some identity debates are twitterstorms in a teacup, quickly blowing themselves away into nothing. But equally, symbolism often matters, whether that symbol is a statue, a flag or a footballer taking the knee. When to engage in these symbolic questions is a matter of political judgement – no general rule can be applied to cover each specific circumstance. What can be said in general terms, however, is that there are some questions of culture and

⁴ Labour Together, *Red Shift: Labour's Path to Power*, 2023, <https://labourtogether.uk/report/red-shift>

identity that are undeniably substantive. On these, choosing not to engage is a dereliction of duty. On these issues (five of which are addressed in the second part of this paper), any party that seeks to govern must have a public account of its approach.

3. Disagree better by being clear about where the boundaries lie

Almost everybody, regardless of their political persuasions, agrees that we should improve the tone of our political debate. However, disagreeing with respect demands we are clear about what is inside and outside the scope of legitimate discussion and disagreement. In some areas, setting these boundaries is easier than in others. Research on culture and identity clashes from the King's College Policy Institute shows that boundaries are more contested on some issues (like race, gender identity, free speech and hate speech – each of which we address in the second part of this paper) than on others (like Brexit, Scottish independence or party politics).⁵

4. Engage before the heat is on

De-escalating identity conflicts takes time, and is far more likely to be effective if there is meaningful engagement with issues before they dominate the headlines. One of the greatest risks of avoiding cultural and identity issues is that they don't go away while your head is in the sand. Eventually you will be forced to surface and pick your side. The time spent in denial will have been wasted, when you could have done the meaningful engagement that bridging requires. Britain will soon enter the white heat of an election campaign. These are the precious final moments that remain before cool heads are impossible to find.

5. Don't let differences get in the way of constructive change

A proactive approach to defusing cultural conflict will not lead to a unanimous consensus. What it can do, though, is decrease the sense of frustration, and sometimes fear, that drives polarisation. On some key issues there is more potential to unlock latent consensus than some think possible. This is particularly true on issues like racial inequality and sexuality. On each of these issues, and others, there is common ground between progressive, middling and socially conservative views.

In the abstract, these five steps sound sensible enough. They are common-sense solutions to our culture clashes. In practice, things get more difficult. In the section that follows, we take five of the most hotly contested questions of identity and culture - patriotism, immigration, race, free speech and gender - and apply the lessons above.

⁵ See: Policy Institute at King's, *Culture wars in the UK: How the public understand the debate*, 2021, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk-how-the-public-understand-the-debate.pdf>

Part Two

Identity Clashes

Can Labour find its voice?

Patriotism - Learning to love the flag

Understanding the issue

No politician was ever chosen to govern without first embracing the symbols of the country they aspire to lead. Almost every leader of the Labour Party, for instance, has engaged with flags and other national symbols. This was not, as is sometimes claimed, something that began with Tony Blair and New Labour. Attlee's 'Now Win the Peace' campaign in 1945, for instance, was surely the most patriotic campaign in Labour's history.

There are challenges in engaging with national identity in today's Britain that were not true of Attlee's. Ours is a much more consciously multi-national United Kingdom than it was just 25 years ago, let alone 80. Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has changed the very nature of the UK. This has created uncertainty over where English identity fits, and a challenge to Britishness as the shared identity of a multinational state.

There are some national symbols that retain a broad appeal for most people. The NHS bridges social and political tribes⁶. So do sporting teams, including Team GB and the English, Scottish and Welsh national teams, with significant efforts to emulate that in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement too.

But there is evidence that sustained political polarisation on issues of identity and culture has had a corrosive effect. British Future's research finds that 65% of people associate the Union Jack with pride and patriotism, down from 78% a decade ago. The figure is lower still in Scotland, at 55%. There, even the Saltire has lost some of its appeal, now seen as a symbol of pride by 70%, down from 84% a decade ago - indicative of some mutual dissociation in Scotland's political tribes.⁷ The politics of patriotism, once relatively simple, has become more complicated - particularly for any party that wishes to gain support across national borders.

⁶ See, for example, Ipsos research <https://twitter.com/benatipsos/status/1559497777952051210/>

⁷ British Future, *Jubilee Britain*, 2022, <https://www.britishfuture.org/publication/jubilee-britain/>

Building the bridge

There are two well-trodden paths that those on the left could take on questions of patriotism and both are better avoided. The first is to follow in the hallowed footsteps of George Orwell and anatomise the left's ambivalence towards national identity. This would see more time spent critiquing the past than expressing an ideal of national identity that Labour can promote. The second is to dwell in a long tradition of progressive counter narratives, reducing British history to the defiance of the Levellers, the vision of the Chartists, and the heroics of the anti-fascists at Cable Street⁸.

Instead, Labour should do more than position itself within a dissenting strand of British history. The party's service in both war and peace has created many of the most cherished institutions in British society. Labour must show that it is at ease with, and is proud of, Britain's established history, not just its anti-establishment fringe. Of course, a Labour account of national identity will involve differentiating between civic patriotism and ethnic nationalism. However, using "progressive patriotism" as an inoculating force runs considerable risks. It is vital to challenge exclusionary and extreme ideas about national identity. But this must be achieved without treating all mainstream conservative approaches as equivalent.

This is not a call for performative patriotism. Instead, Labour must evince an everyday ease with national symbols. Political speeches on abstract values about national identity, patriotism and British values are rarely convincing. General elections are not competitions to place the biggest flag on a political stage. If politics was that simple, Liz Truss would have governed for a decade.

A better route to an effective Labour patriotism would be pursued through a "show, not tell" approach, normalising rather than fetishising patriotism. This would involve demonstrating an everyday ease with our national symbols, like Remembrance Sunday, the Jubilee, national sporting events in England, Scotland and Wales, and major anniversaries. The high days and holidays of the national calendar can and should be an antidote to cultural conflicts. They are important opportunities to reach across social divides, showing that we can both respect our diversity and share what we have in common. There are plenty of organic opportunities where our national traditions reach across towns and cities, engage across generations and across communities, inclusive of everybody who calls Britain home.

A sustained and normal engagement with national symbols and moments provides the necessary foundation for the substantive argument that the party wishes to make. But it is more than that. Labour's core purpose – to make Britain better – is not just progressive. It is patriotic.

⁸See: Billy Bragg, *The Progressive Patriot*, 2007; Tristram Hunt, *Past and Present: Thoughts on the English Radical Tradition*, 2017

Immigration - Turning down the temperature

Understanding the issue

These are phrases that anyone who has engaged in the migration debate has heard a thousand times: *“There are too many of them... They are taking our stuff... They aren’t like us - and they don’t want to be... And if we try to talk about it, they call us racist”*.

These words encapsulate the populist “them and us” case against immigration, and it is an identity clash issue that the left has struggled with for over 20 years. In office, New Labour governments lost the public’s confidence in how they managed the scale of immigration and its local impacts. Ministers successfully talked up the economic contribution to GDP. They took a tough approach to asylum. But they never secured confidence that they were handling migration fairly, either for those who come to this country or the communities they joined.

Efforts to recognise legitimate concerns could be clunky and unconvincing. When Ed Miliband produced a mug bearing the campaign slogan “controls on immigration”, it was received scathingly on the left without winning the trust of anyone else. By the time of the EU referendum, when immigration was raised, the pro-EU left would rather change the subject.

In terms of public attitudes to the issue, this has been a decade of two halves, with the salience of immigration far lower now than it was then. In 2016, 40% of Britons considered migration to be a priority. For much of this parliament, that figure has ranged between 8% and 11%.⁹ With Channel crossings and asylum in the headlines every week, salience is now rising again, to an average of 18% this year, driven largely by those who currently intend to vote Conservative. A third (33%) of the Conservatives’ current supporters see immigration as a priority issue, compared to 9% of Labour’s. The conscious Conservative effort to increase the salience of immigration has therefore primarily influenced its own supporters. Immigration is a top three issue for Conservative voters, yet has not featured in the top six issues for Labour voters in any month in this parliament. By contrast, it was second for voters of both parties in 2010 and 2015.

Historically, around two-thirds of Britons wanted migration to fall. Today, that figure has dropped to below half. Once more, this is split by party: two-thirds of Conservatives and one-third of Labour voters want overall numbers lowered.

A third of Labour’s vote is a minority, but it is a large one. Labour’s electoral coalition must bridge those who would prefer reduced numbers and those who do not. This coalition is indeed varied and often complex. Those who desire reductions are often selective. There is broad support for more nurses, doctors, care-workers and fruit-pickers, for instance.

⁹ All data from Ipsos issues index, 2018 onwards: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/issues-index-2018-onwards>

Those who support migration, meanwhile, are not all of one mind. Some are former Brexit voters, who feel that we have now taken control of our borders. Others are former Remainers, who are ideologically pro-migration. Others were inspired by NHS workers during the pandemic. While the media, political and online discourse is black-and-white, public opinion contains far more shades of grey.

Attitudes are more polarised on asylum and refugee issues, however. Dangerous journeys across the Channel are nobody's idea of a well-managed asylum system, but the government's appetite to pick fights with 'left-wing lawyers', bishops and refugee groups is polarising opinion along party lines.

The Conservatives are making a deliberate choice to reheat and polarise the asylum debate. This represents a significant political risk to them. The public is scathing about the government's record on asylum and few governing parties have gone into past elections trying to increase the salience of an issue where they are weak.

But Conservative voters are unhappy with both the overall scale of immigration and the dramatic and visible loss of control in the Channel. And no poll of the policy to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda has found a clear majority of voters in favour or against the scheme. An argument which forces people to choose control or compassion sees one third of the public in each camp, frustrating those who believe that a competent government should be able to achieve both.¹⁰

This softening of attitudes creates opportunities for a Labour voice that balances the two sides. Most people believe that the general public has become more negative about immigration in recent years, largely reflecting the polarisation of political and media debate. In fact, their views are less negative, more nuanced, and present an opportunity to bridge divides.

¹⁰ For an overview of public polling results on the Rwanda scheme see British Future, *Monthly public attitudes memo*, 2022, <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/June-2022-Attitudes-briefing.-British-Future..pdf>

Building the bridge

Labour holds an unprecedented, sustained lead over the Conservatives on immigration. With Channel Crossings continuing, the governing party is likely to be under considerably more pressure than the opposition. Labour should use this opportunity to pursue an agenda of principled depolarisation on immigration, both in opposition and in office.

While in opposition, a Labour critique of how the government is failing will resonate both with those who oppose the government's policy in principle and those who think it has been a shambles in practice. Labour has been helped by the government behaving like it is the opposition, with initiatives like 'small boats week' (in Summer 2023) received even by Conservative supporters, in politics and the media, as an embarrassing failure. Fantastical policies like deporting asylum seekers to Ascension Island were briefed on to the front-pages, only to collapse to nothing within hours.

Over the next 12 months, Labour should expect to face more pressure to combine practical and principled objections to the government's approach. This will include both the Rwanda scheme, if it proceeds, and the emerging argument within the government about whether to pull out of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The bedrock of a Labour bridging approach would be to repair, reform and rebuild an asylum system that the public can trust. Labour will need to defend British participation in the refugee convention – a shared commitment across governments of both parties for seven decades. But it must also set out a practical answer to how to deliver an orderly, effective and humane asylum system that can address the current challenges, particularly the dangerous and large-scale Channel crossings.

Labour's five-point plan on Channel crossings consciously bridges the divide between control and compassion: it is tough on people traffickers while also emphasising the need for international cooperation to design a way for Britain, and other countries, to take a fair share of those seeking protection. A policy to return those whose claims fail, where it is safe to do so, depends on international agreements in Europe and beyond. Fantasy plans to pull out of every international agreement are a quixotic attempt to solve an international problem alone. Labour's approach recognises this.

There is less heat in the debate about migration for study and work than there has ever been, despite record net migration numbers in 2022. The best way to reinforce and build on this is to amplify the public voice, particularly that of the 'balancer middle'. The benefits and the pressures need to be made more transparent and part of the national debate. A budget-style annual migration day in Parliament, preceded by extensive engagement across nations and regions, could foreground a commitment to managing migration fairly. With Labour accepting the end of free movement, and the government having introduced more open policies for non-EU skills, student and post-study visas, there is a quiet consensus on much of immigration for work and study. Though the public is increasingly pragmatic about

migration to fill labour force gaps, Labour should also ensure employers using short-term labour, for example in agriculture, pay the living wage and follow good employment practices. Those recruiting for jobs on shortage occupation lists should also be forced to increase their investment in domestic training.

Meanwhile, a review of UK citizenship policy should actively encourage citizenship for those settling here in the long-term. Helping those who come to Britain to embrace the language, culture and identity of their new home is an underexplored area of latent consensus. The best way to entrench a long-term shift in attitudes will be to broaden the social contract. Labour should therefore also support efforts to make civic welcoming a new norm for those building a new life in Britain, extending this beyond hosting refugees to include English language conversation clubs, work skills and social events that promote mixing between migrants and ‘welcomers’. Unlocking the broad civic appetite for welcoming efforts can further defuse polarisation and promote a new social norm of making migration work for those who come to Britain and for the communities that they join.¹¹

¹¹ See organisations like Welcome Hong Kong, <https://www.welcomehk.org/news/britons-welcome-hong-kongers-as-figures-show-uk-issues-over-110000-bno-visas>

Navigating the shifting language of race

Understanding the issue

Britain is talking more about race. This should be unsurprising. Ours is a far more diverse country than it used to be. Black, Asian and mixed race Britons now make up one sixth of the population, compared to just one twentieth a generation ago. Disparities of race have never been more complex than they are today, not just across ethnic groups, but within them, by age, education, social class, geography and gender. The political debate about race, meanwhile, has become more binary.

The Sewell Commission (2021), launched by the government in the wake of anti-racism protests, offered a textbook example of how not to talk about race if you want the conversation to go anywhere. The debate that followed its publication descended into an exchange of accusations of bad faith between both the government and its critics.

Despite contributing much to the progress Britain has made on race, discourse amongst progressives has become more pessimistic about the scale of the challenges that remain. That partly reflects rising expectations. Prejudiced attitudes are in inter-generational decline. It doesn't always feel this way, of course, and new technology has not helped. Social media has made the experience of racism as common as it ever was, because those with toxic views find it much easier to target victims. And while the UK is a comparative leader on race in Europe, that sets a low bar: many European states do not collect the data needed to conduct race audits.

Progress on race has been both fast and slow. Britain has become a less prejudiced and more inclusive society. However, the experience of most Black and Asian Britons is that there is much further to travel on their unfinished journey towards fair chances.

The Black Lives Matter anti-racism protests of 2020 had the broad approval of ethnic minority Britain. Two-thirds were supportive of the protests, rising to eight out of ten Black Britons.¹² Supporters of the anti-racism protests saw them in different ways. Some saw them as an argument about the specificity of anti-black prejudice. To others, they were a campaign to tackle racism and prejudice across all groups. Those who saw the protests as urgent and overdue were often most sceptical about whether talk would turn to action.

Half of the white majority population supported the anti-racism protests too, while a fifth were actively opposed to them. A quarter of people described themselves as on the fence about the protests, among both white and minority respondents.¹³ This reflected an ambivalence about the protests, which took place during the Covid pandemic and lockdown restrictions. It also expressed doubts about conflating US issues, like policing and violence,

¹² British Future, *Race and opportunity in Britain: Finding common ground*, 2021, <https://www.britishfuture.org/publication/race-and-opportunity-in-britain-finding-common-ground/>

¹³ Ibid

with the challenges facing the UK. In British Future's research groups at that time, even those who described themselves as being "on the fence" about the protests were keen to emphasise their commitment to tackling racism, prejudice and discrimination.¹⁴

The quarter of the public who say they opposed the protests included mainstream social conservatives, as well as a toxic group whose opposition was driven by latent and overt racial resentment.¹⁵ Unlike those on the fence, Labour has few prospects with either segment of these vocal opponents, though it should differentiate between the mainstream conservatives who it can respectfully disagree with, and those toxic voices it must isolate.

Building the bridge

Whether Labour can bridge effectively on race equality may be one of the biggest questions of culture and identity in the decade to come. A successful bridging politics would combine the following approaches:

Frame race issues to bridge race and class divides

Labour should frame its engagement in ways that can broaden the coalition for race equality. The biggest frustration for the centre-left is how often the position of the white working class is deployed as a tactical counter-argument when disparities for ethnic minorities are highlighted. This is frustrating not because the analysis is wrong, but because the concern for social class is dropped just as soon as race is no longer the topic. Minority or majority disadvantages are thus set up as causes we must choose between. The language of 'privilege', common on the left, makes the same mistake though, setting up an unhelpful race-versus-class argument. Even amongst ethnic minority voters, the term "privilege" is unhelpful – reducing support.¹⁶ Language like this makes it harder to build coalitions for change and mutual solidarity. The answer must be a message of 'fair chances for all', and approaches that tackle the distinct unfair barriers that get in the way of everyone.

Get practical

British Future's research shows that instincts about how to talk about race now differ across generations. Across all ages, however, there is a much stronger consensus for action on racial equality when the agenda for change is practical.¹⁷ If Labour allows the race debate to remain dominated by contested language, it will go nowhere. Rather, the party should place specific proposals to move from talk to action in the foreground. This might mean focusing on key disparities like tackling bias in recruitment for jobs; stronger action on hate crime, offline and online; and a balanced approach to teaching the history of race and Empire. In each of these areas British Future's research has identified a broad inter-ethnic consensus, across minority and majority groups, for constructive action.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Become a stronger space for meaningful contact

Labour has maintained the support of about six out of ten ethnic minority voters, with around a quarter leaning Conservative.¹⁸ While this remains a strong lead, that support is more contingent today than it once was. The strong party identification of the first generation has faded significantly among younger age groups. Labour should seek to strengthen those links, and there is one obvious area in which they could. Ethnic minorities make up around a fifth of Labour's vote and a fifth of their MPs. However, they are a considerably smaller proportion of the party membership. While there is no official data, the ESRC party members project estimates that the Labour membership is 92% white and 8% ethnic minority. Labour could develop a more grounded approach to bridging on race if it also made a concerted effort, over time, to diversify both the ethnic and social class composition of the party membership itself. Labour will better represent the country when its own membership does too.

¹⁸ As of February 2022, the last time there was a full ethnic minority poll of voting intention, released by Number Cruncher Politics for Peston, <https://twitter.com/sundersays/status/1582384321465569281>

Cancel culture - Where is the line on free speech?

Understanding the issue

While arguments about the scope and limits of free speech have a long history, they have become increasingly central to media discussion of the so-called “culture wars”. In recent years, the term “cancel culture” has become the phrase with the sharpest rise in both media exposure and public awareness. Research from King’s College London showed that half of the population had “never heard” of the term in 2020. By 2022, this had dropped to a quarter – by which time 40% of people had heard “a lot” about it.¹⁹

On free speech, most people are balancers. More in Common’s research finds that, on the one hand, seven out of ten people believe that hate speech is a problem in Britain. Simultaneously, the same figure - seven out of ten people - believe that political correctness is a problem in Britain. For this to be the case, there must be a group of people who believe that both of these things are true, with a smaller flank on each side who see the issue in more binary terms.

Defusing polarisation on this issue therefore demands that we break down the two assumed sides of this debate and illuminate the common ground. Ultimately, a broad majority of the public are liberal on the foundational principles around free speech, though they are more sceptical about claims that are couched in new and unfamiliar language. And where progressives gain a reputation for over-policing boundaries, it will be harder to protect foundational principles or pursue progressive change in a sustained way.

Building the bridge

There are four things that Labour must get right on free speech and hate speech:

1. Focus on substance and avoid trivia

Progressives underestimate the reputational damage that can be done with efforts to police anti-prejudice norms by over-policing trivial examples, such as content in the TV archives. This sends an inadvertent message: for so much time and effort to be spent on these issues, all of the serious stuff must surely have been sorted out.

2. Apply norms consistently to friends and foes

It is easy to challenge political opponents but harder to do so with allies. But we are only usefully contributing to social norms when we apply the same standards to our own political tribe that we call on our opponents to adopt.

¹⁹King’s College London, ‘Woke, cancel culture and white privilege – how the UK’s culture war debate is evolving’, 2022, www.kcl.ac.uk/news/woke-cancel-culture-and-white-privilege-how-the-uks-culture-war-debate-is-evolving

3. Draw clear lines about what can and cannot be said

This is particularly important for three key issues: immigration, antisemitism and islamophobia.

On immigration, for example, it is not racist to talk about the subject, which is an important policy issue, so long as racism is kept out of the debate.

A similar approach can help communicate the key boundaries on antisemitism. It is not antisemitic to challenge the Israeli government over its human rights record, so long as you do so in the same way that any other countries' government might be challenged over its record and actions. It is antisemitic, however, to hold British Jews collectively responsible for Israeli policy, or to use antisemitic tropes and imagery in these arguments.

This approach can also help to clarify the most contested public and political argument about free speech, which relates to anti-Muslim prejudice (also called Islamophobia). Controversies over anti-Muslim prejudice and free speech are a reason to define boundaries effectively – not to duck this issue as too controversial. The key to getting this boundary right is to make this distinction: firstly, critiquing the ideas of any theological or political view must be protected as free speech; but equally, discrimination against any group of people on the basis of their faith is prejudice, akin to racism.

4. Set clear ground-rules for any debate.

A debate should be grounded by clear rules of engagement, and I suggest three:

- Firstly, there should be an absolute prohibition on violence, threat and intimidation. The law can and does curtail speech where this rule is broken. It is also a core foundation – to be applied to every position in every debate – for defusing cultural polarisation.
- Secondly, it is legitimate to promote broad social norms that stigmatise legal but extreme content, in order to exclude extreme speech from public life and mainstream institutions. Much racist and antisemitic speech is legal in the UK but it is still legitimately considered unacceptable. The challenge is to define sufficiently clear boundaries that do not encroach on legitimate democratic speech. Content that dehumanises entire groups or denies their equal standing and status provides clear examples of 'legal but extreme' speech. Examples would include: "the Jews/Muslims will always be a threat to the rest of us" or "black footballers aren't English". There would be a broad consensus that this crosses the line in practice. Where the lines are more contested, detailed engagement can help identify common ground on where this boundary should lie and where there is significant disagreement.
- Thirdly, Labour should commit itself to a politics of mutual respect. This is a cultural norm, promoted through actions and behaviour.

Sex, gender and competing rights

The debate about gender and sex-based rights is the identity politics issue which has seen the most rapid increase in the scale and intensity of public debate. So why did this issue become so heated and polarised, and can a bridging effort resolve this conflict constructively?

Understanding the issue

Trans people are a very small minority in Britain. In the 2021 census, 1 in 200 people in England and Wales identified with a gender different to their sex at birth. This is an important fact to start with. For a small and historically stigmatised minority to be at the epicentre of media and political attention can be a source of anxiety, discomfort and fear.

In recent years, a debate has been raging however. It centres around the questions of whether it should be made easier for someone to change their gender identity, and whether someone who changes gender should have the same rights as someone who is born to the same sex.

Much of the public find this a new and somewhat unfamiliar argument. Overall, public attitudes are mixed, nuanced and moveable, as an excellent overview published by More in Common clearly set out²⁰. They showed that public attitudes can, simultaneously, be described as both “trans inclusive” (meaning they support the rights of trans people to be included and accepted in their desired gender identity) and “gender critical” (meaning they believe that gender and sex must be treated differently in certain situations). In other words, there is an intuitive ‘live and let live’ instinct of tolerance for people’s personal lives that exists towards trans people. However, there is also concern about opening up women-only institutions to trans women.

These two views are in tension, but they are not necessarily contradictory. Broader support for trans inclusion will be contingent on getting key boundaries and details right. Particularly important issues include our approach to children and young people, the boundaries between sex-based rights and trans inclusion in specific areas (such as women’s sexual health services, refuges and prisons), and how sports should resolve competing claims about inclusion and fairness.

Facing a debate that is so heated and complex, many are tempted to simply ‘lean out’ and avoid engaging at all. Across the country, British Future has hosted small discussions where participants nominate issues they find difficult to talk about. No topic caused greater trepidation than this one, with people second-guessing themselves as they tried to phrase their questions and opinions without appearing ignorant or rude.

²⁰ More in Common, *Britons and Gender Identity Navigating Common Ground and Division*, 2022, <https://www.moreincommon.org.uk/media/giljcopo/britons-and-gender-identity-navigating-common-ground-and-division-june-2022.pdf>

The issue has been particularly difficult for the left, as it has pitted sections of the women's and LGBT+ rights communities against each other. As a result, many of those who lack lived experience of the issues, or who are pulled in both directions by a desire to be a supportive 'ally', avoid the debate entirely. Doing so is a grave error. Any debate inevitably becomes more polarised when most people lean out of it. Part of the challenge to those who wish to 'bridge' this issue is that we must encourage more people to 'lean in' and take a position that balances competing claims and concerns.

Building the bridge

The recent sex and gender debate demonstrates the limits of avoidance as a strategy to decrease the salience of an issue. Equally, with competing rights to reconcile, and principles of law and public policy to be determined, we must move beyond the level of slogans.

"Trans women are women" and "trans men are men" are two such slogans. They arose for good reasons: as a simple effort to express solidarity. They entail an implicit commitment to recognise those who transition as part of the gender with which they now identify, such as in the use of their preferred pronouns. These slogans fall short, however, when they are taken as the end of the policy debate and not the start.

Two central questions of public policy dominate this debate. The first relates to the process by which gender transition is legally recognised by the state. The second relates to access to single-sex services and facilities after a person changes their gender identity, whether or not they go through the legal process.

The Labour Party's position, announced recently by Anneliese Dodds MP – the Shadow Secretary of State for Women and Equalities – is an important example of bridging in practice.²¹ Labour's position is both inclusive towards trans people and recognises a distinction between sex and gender. On the former, Dodds has said that Labour will reduce some of the barriers to a legal change of gender, while retaining the involvement of a medical diagnosis of "gender dysphoria" and excluding "self-identification". On the latter, she has said that "there will always be places where it is reasonable for biological women only to have access".

On this issue, there is broad public consensus on the distinction that Dodds sets out – far more so than the polarised political and media debate recognises. In 2022, the domestic abuse charity Women's Aid committed their support to reserving some spaces for one sex only. The LGBT+ pressure group Stonewall illustrates the new consensus. Where once it called for the UK government to drop single-sex exceptions, today it says that it "is really important to say that we do not advocate for the removal of the single-sex exemptions in the

²¹ Anneliese Dodds in the Guardian, 'Labour will lead on reform of transgender rights – and we won't take lectures from the divisive Tories', July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/24/labour-will-lead-on-reform-of-transgender-rights-and-we-wont-take-lectures-from-the-divisive-tories>

Equality Act’.²² Stonewall says that its historic fear – that exceptions would be used sweepingly – has not occurred. While there are real differences of view, the breadth of agreement that single sex exceptions are valid in principle – where they are a proportionate means to achieve a legitimate public policy aim – makes this a more bounded, more practical, and less existential argument than it may sometimes sound.

Reducing the temperature to pursue constructive reforms

Anneliese Dodds’s recent intervention on this debate was the right one – an excellent illustration of the kind of bridging this paper advocates. Now, Labour should set out a values-based approach to future dialogue and decisions about gender recognition. It should also propose that it will address the detailed issues of trans and women’s rights outside of the noise and heat of a General Election campaign.

To defuse the argument, Labour should develop a clear account of the principles that it brings to the debate about reform – including a recognition that there are clashes between gender identity and sex-based rights that need to be addressed and resolved. This should also include a proposal about the forms of public and stakeholder engagement that could reconcile competing views and build a settled consensus for reforms.

While Labour cannot control the political and policy choices of other parties, it should favour cross-party cooperation on these issues in the next parliament, reflecting the proud UK tradition of limiting partisan mobilisation around issues of conscience, such as abortion, in contrast to the US experience.

This should involve hearing trans voices and women’s voices, and seeking to promote a dialogue of mutual respect, in which violence, intimidation and threat are not acceptable. Citizen deliberation could also broaden the circle of engagement and build social consensus. In this way, some of those currently ‘leaning out’ of the debate could play a constructive role within it.

It is rare for more than 1% or 2% of people to identify the conflict between gender identity and sex-based rights as one of the biggest issues facing the country. But it would be a mistake to argue they are a ‘distraction’ from more important issues. A better argument is that the issues of equality, fairness and dignity for trans people and women are important, and the noise and heat of an election campaign are not the best forum to address the substantive issues.

²² Stonewall, ‘Stonewall affirms trans equality policy positions’, 2023, <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/stonewall-affirms-trans-equality-policy-positions>

Conclusion

Few people in Britain want a culture war – but our debates about culture and identity are more divisive than most of us would want. This presents our political leaders with a choice. They can amplify our culture clashes, avoid them, or bridge the divides in our society.

For Keir Starmer, this choice is particularly important. For the Labour Party to succeed, it must reach across political divides. It has already shown that it wishes to. By accepting Brexit, Labour has sought to span our geographic, generational and class divides. Now it can also unfreeze Scotland's political realignment, which has seen the Scottish National Party dominate politics north of the border ever since the independence referendum of 2014. For Labour, more than any other party, bridge building is an electoral necessity. If the party is to govern, it must win a coalition of voters whose views on social and cultural issues differ.

This paper's argument is bigger than political strategy, however. Instead, it argues that bridging is the principled thing to do, not just the pragmatic one. Bridging is essential to the health of our democracy. It is about the type of society we want to be. And it is vital to a progressive credo that advocates equality and cooperation.

When political strategists seek “dividing lines” in elections, they often mobilise their tribe with an “us versus them” appeal on questions of identity and culture. While that might bring short-term reward, it brings lasting pain. A political system that locks in this dynamic will create a politics of ever-increasing division and mutual polarisation, where bridging voices are crowded out. When identity divides dominate politics in this way, what really matters – whether politicians deliver for the public – gets forgotten.

The Labour Party must now make the value-based case for defusing conflict, persuading progressive voters that democracy demands give and take, and that to compromise is not to concede. The entire Labour movement must respect differences on issues of culture and identity between our fellow citizens, while also protecting the boundaries of tolerance. Labour's politics of social change should always be grounded in an ethos of mutual respect, seeking to broaden coalitions not narrow them, entrenching change with wide support and reducing the divides within our society.

That is also a challenge for progressives in civil society, who want to pursue constructive social change without fuelling the polarisation that can derail such efforts. This should be looked on as an opportunity. Building broad coalitions across divides can advance and entrench progress on an issue. One reason for the growing public salience of climate and the environment is that politicians and campaigners have found arguments that reach across cultural divides.

This paper has shown that common ground still exists in our society, on even the most hotly contested questions of culture and identity, such as patriotism, race, migration, gender identity and free speech. It suggests that we can build bridges across our divides – as long as we are prepared to put the work in.

This does not mean avoiding issues of culture and engagement. Nor does it mean trying to 'split the difference' between different viewpoints. Instead, it means engaging constructively and seriously with the arguments of others. A starting point is to recognise that these are substantive issues on which one can take a range of positions. There is not a binary choice between so-called "woke" and "anti-woke" tribes. We do not have to choose between one or another all-inclusive package.

It also entails looking inwards as well as outwards. It is not difficult to find people – across both left and right – whose solution to “culture war” politics is to tell someone else to pipe down and shut up. Of course, it is legitimate to challenge cynical and artificial attempts by an opponent to exaggerate social divisions for political and electoral ends. But that will only be credible when leaders and parties take responsibility for their own side's contribution to the culture with which we talk and act on identity.

This paper began by noting an apparent paradox: Britain is more divided than we want, but less divided than we are beginning to believe. We can, and should, turn this to our advantage. Britain is indeed divided. Now, we must use that as impetus to engage properly with the questions of culture and identity that threaten to pull us further apart.

While we may have culture clashes, we do not yet have a culture war. If we seize this opportunity, we can stop our divides from growing into an unbridgeable gap. The Labour Party has a chance to do so. Its leadership has shown that it has the desire to. Now, this should become a shared challenge for the broader party and its allies in civic society too. That is not just pragmatic politics. It is a point of principle.