

BRITAIN'S LEADERS ARE FAILING TO NAVIGATE CULTURAL CHANGE

- New research finds Britons feel politicians and campaign groups are seeking to inflame rather than resolve cultural conflicts
- Public feel shut out of the debate on societal change, with fear of asking 'silly questions' and culture of taking offence breeding resentment
- The 'British way of handling change' is under threat. The public want fewer soundbites and more moderation and balance
- Call for new cross-party commissions to help navigate complex cultural debates such as colonial era statues and trans rights

[27 July 2021, London] More in Common today launches a new report, 'Dousing the Flames: How leaders can better navigate cultural change in 2020s Britain', which explores what the public think of key cultural flashpoints such as taking the knee, statues and Britain's colonial past. The report, which includes findings from wide-spread fieldwork (February 2020 to June 2021) and large-scale polling, contains a stark warning for Britain's leaders.

FINDING: HOW CHANGE HAPPENS AS IMPORTANT AS THE CHANGE ITSELF

Rather than the country being split into two camps on different sides of the cultural wars, most Britons are not opposed to cultural change. Exclusive More in Common polling by YouGov reveals that the public think major campaigns for social change have been a force for good, including:

- Gay pride: 57% force for good, 12% force for bad
- MeToo: 41% force for good, 15% force for bad
- Black Lives Matter: 46% force for good, 35% force for bad

But the public expect change to take place in a way that is respectful, doesn't cause a 'racket' and allows people to speak their mind. The report finds people feel this 'British way' of handling change is increasingly under threat.

During UK-wide focus groups, the report's authors heard that people were increasingly worried about 'asking silly' questions, using the wrong terms, or challenging ideas for fear of being shouted down or labelled a bigot. Overall, 63% of the public say they are worried about the tone of current public debate. This is breeding resentment that change is something being done to, not with, the public.

Britons express frustration that politicians and campaigners (on both the left and right) are behaving as culture wars arsonists - more interested in soundbites or attention-seeking tactics than seeing real change and creating a space where people can decide the best path for the country and their community.

FINDING: BRITONS TAKE A BALANCED VIEW OF CULTURAL FLASHPOINTS

Despite holding strong views on cultural issues, the public's attitudes are far more balanced than those of right-wing culture war warriors or woke progressive campaigners.

Even on three areas commonly considered to be cultural flashpoints, there is common ground and a desire to balance competing views and concerns:

History and heritage: Britons agree with the moving of colonial era statues to museums and the National Trust's Retain and Explain Policy, but they are far more divided about protestors tearing statues down and think moving Churchill from Parliament Square would be ridiculous.

- 66% of people expressed pride in British history, coupled with a strong desire to look forward while learning from the past

Free speech and ‘cancel culture’: People want the space to be able to talk about cultural issues, and think that people take offence too easily at genuine mistakes. But they also want people to be held accountable for offensive and dangerous speech – even if that means cancelling them.

- Britons are more than twice as likely to prioritise protecting free speech (54%) over stopping offensive speech through regulation (21%)
- Almost one in two (48%) believe it is fair that people can lose their jobs if they say hateful things

Diversity and ‘wokeism’: People are proud of changes that have seen our society become fairer and more tolerant, they support taking the knee, but want to see symbols backed up by action:

- 68% of the public express pride that our country is now more embracing of people of diverse religions, races and sexual orientation

BRITAIN’S LEADERS NEED TO STEP UP

The report offers lessons to leaders, from politicians to campaigners, on how they can better handle cultural change. Highlighting the fact that public acceptance of same-sex relationships has increased exponentially,¹ the report calls on leaders to learn from the pragmatic, big tent approach that gay rights campaigners took to changing hearts and minds, rather than seeking to tear things down.

The report:

- Makes clear that in navigating change, campaigners and politicians need to speak in language that is tangible, rather than inflammatory – avoiding use of abstract terms like privilege and intersectionality, and instead speak in terms of everyday real experiences.
- Offers lessons to leaders beyond politics, calling for them to step up where politicians have failed. Highlighting the importance that the British public place on schools to help educate the next generation, the report warns against schools and colleges giving either conservative parents or activist campaign groups a veto on what can be taught. It also calls on businesses to do more to ensure that efforts towards diversity training don’t inadvertently breed resentment or create an ‘us vs. them’ culture in the workplace.
- Recommends the creation of independent expert panels that represent a range of viewpoints to find common ground on flashpoint issues such as trans rights and colonial era statues.

Luke Tryl, UK Director of More in Common, said:

- *“From gay rights, to gender equality, to attitudes to the environment. Britain has a proud history of navigating cultural change. Unfortunately, that ‘British way’ of going about change is under siege from a new legion of culture war arsonists seeking short-term political advantage by importing American style tactics to inflame our national discourse.*

“The British public are clear they want more Gareth Southgate, less George Galloway and Nigel Farage to help bring the country together. Rather than trying to split the country into a false binary of statue slayers and saviours, Britain’s leaders need to create the space where the public can debate, question and decide a path forward on these cultural flashpoints.”

--ENDS--

¹ 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.

Notes to the editor:**About More in Common**

More in Common works to unite divided societies, with offices in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States. We work with a wide range of groups in civil society, politics, government, business, faith, education, philanthropy and the media to connect people across lines of division.

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Quotes from focus group participants

"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

"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

"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

"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

"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 monkeys, and everyone knows that they don't care" – Becca, Civic Pragmatist, Brighton

"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

"Basically, the school said, when Matthew leaves after the holidays, he's coming back as Alice. 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