COUNTER CULTURE

HOW TO RESIST THE CULTURE WARS AND BUILD 21ST CENTURY SOLIDARITY

By Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding

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Counter Culture

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build 21st century solidarity

Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding

Acknowledgements

About the authors

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Both authors are writing here in a personal capacity.

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While it is only a year and a half old, it is possible to glimpse two very different pictures of how this decade will play out.

In more hopeful moments we can imagine how the inequalities that disfigure our country and which have been so vividly illuminated by the pandemic finally start to be defeated by all of us who will no longer tolerate the ways in which unemployment, low pay, violence, poor housing, racism, discrimination against disabled people and the oppression of women and LGBT people leave some of us much more able to live the life of our choosing and some of our lives cruelly constrained or cut short. That positive vision is of a future in which we stand together to right historic wrongs and build a society worthy of the memory of those we have lost in this awful period.

That future is possible but not inevitable. In fact, on current trends, it seems to us much more likely that we will see progressive movements and political parties distracted, divided, demoralised and defeated by those pursuing a strategy around the so-called 'culture wars'.

In Part One we will look in more detail at the phrase – where it comes from, what it means and how it is different in the UK from the US and elsewhere. The genesis of this language and strategy is important to understand so that

we can better predict how it might play out next, but for now a short summary will suffice. Culture war issues are those concerned with identity, values and culture which are vulnerable to being weaponised by those concerned with engaging and enraging people on an emotional level, not coming to a policy settlement on a political level. In some contexts, social fissures over controversial topics will arise naturally, but for our purposes we are primarily interested in those fights which are orchestrated by those with something to gain, a group we have dubbed 'the culture wars peddlers'. We will look at three ways to tell if someone is a culture wars peddler (including their appeals to 'in group' loyalty, their focus on 'zero sum' thinking and how they magnify the minor, the marginal and the made-up to inflame tensions) and explore how, in this country at least, the culture wars should best be understood as an elite strategy rather than a public opinion reality.

We referred above to the so-called culture wars. Even the term itself is a frame pushed by culture wars peddlers to make it seem like some sort of extreme split between different 'cultures' is somehow inevitable and everyone will end up on clearly defined 'sides'. That is what makes this kind of politics so dangerous for those of us who are more interested in the ties that bind us than the issues that divide us. We need to remember that for culture wars peddlers *the polarisation is the point.*

That is why we will be inviting all readers to ask themselves a simple question:

Am I here to win a culture war, or to end one?

It is not just up to politicians whether our common life will continue its slide towards division and anger: we have all got

a role to play in denying the culture wars peddlers the fight they want. So we hope that what follows will be as relevant to you if you are a grassroots activist, a commentator, a funder or an organisational leader as to those involved in politics at a national or local level.

While this has been written by and for people with a stake in the politics of the United Kingdom, we hope it will also be of interest to international readers given the ways in which the English-language internet, the global reach of Prime Minister's Questions and the international appeal of UK-based media outlets help to export some of the worst aspects of our increasingly ugly political debate. Our main concern, however, is to provide analysis which speaks to people on the right as well as the left here in the UK who have a nagging fear that we all have a lot to lose from the culture wars and current responses to them.

The dilemma on the right

There are many on the right who see the undoubted electoral gains in talking up the culture wars but who worry about the implications for minorities if their rights become a political football. While some have voiced these concerns, many others who would rather win elections based on ideas about the free market, personal responsibility and individual liberties have concluded that this strategy is a distasteful necessity that they are willing to indulge because perhaps it is just an inevitable corrective to the excesses of 'the Great Awokening'.

Later we will explore whether it's quite fair to characterise the culture wars as being primarily or even equally a phenomenon on the progressive side but, even if conservative readers maintain that view, we hope they would acknowledge the specific role they can play in

raising the standards of public debate. We want to convince reluctant conservative culture wars converts that their instinctive aversion to this strategy was correct and that the electoral gain is simply not worth the societal pain. So the analysis that follows is designed to be useful to those in all political traditions who yearn for mutual understanding to replace the shrill excesses that have characterised the last few years.

The dilemma on the left

The dilemma on the left is different. Some progressives seem to think there are only three strategies available: i) simply ignore the culture wars and all the harm they do to people who expect, deserve and demand progressive allyship, in the hope they will fizzle out on their own ii) concede the terrain and join in with critiques of social justice campaigners as 'elite' or 'out of touch' or iii) go all out to win the wars.

We think all three of these strategies are traps. Quite apart from the principled objections, they do not even work in political terms: the wider public thinks progressives pursuing the first strategy are evasive, the second seem inauthentic and the third appear to relish conflict.

Instead, we think there is another strategy entirely, one rooted in what unites rather than separates us and that could deliver real change by inspiring cooperation on a scale equal to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

This is not simply a question of our personal preferences around how people should work together in a spirit of love, curiosity and mutual respect (although we *do* have those preferences). Instead, as we will explore in Part Two, generating a widespread sense of unity and solidarity is *essential* for progressives and beneficial for everyone.

The rage many progressives feel about the inequality and injustice that disfigure our society is not merely understandable and legitimate – it can be actively helpful as a source of collective inspiration and personal resilience. The point at which it tips from a strength into a weakness is when righteous anger becomes self-righteous toxicity. Nobody – most of all progressives – can afford for relationships to become poisoned in this way, because the challenges of the 2020s are simply too big for any group or segment of society to deal with them alone. As we have seen in the first year of this devastating pandemic, only solidarity – inside countries and between them – offers real security. The next frontiers – regulating technology, transforming our economy or dealing with the climate and ecological emergencies – are ones that we have to navigate as a whole society (and eventually as a whole global community).

In Part Three we will look at the main types of culture wars peddlers – the grievance mongers, the perpetually outraged and the trolls – before turning in Part Four to the four pillars of a 21st century solidarity strategy. The first pillar is setting out a vision of the future we can all see ourselves in. The second is renewing our democracy. The third is naming it when culture wars peddlers try to distract or divide us. And the fourth is building social movements that are inclusive in composition and culture.

We have included a summary at the end of each part to help readers who are pressed for time or want a quick recap.

In our increasingly fractious age, adopting the strategy laid out here is in our view the only way to secure sustained enthusiasm from the British people for a politics of transformational change. What follows is far from the final word. Many readers will disagree with both the diagnosis and the prescription here. We hope, however, that we can

at least help readers come to their own conclusions about how to respond to the culture wars peddlers and the way they distort our common life. Our causes and communities deserve so much better than the clickbait in their feeds and the choreographed fights on TV. It is up to all of us to make sure they get it.

"You look like a bit of a weirdo trying to pick these fights", one minister admits.[1]

An unnamed minister made this confession to the Spectator's James Forsyth in 2020 but it is Forsyth's colleague Katy Balls who has done the most to chart how "culture wars are an issue of debate in the Tory party." She wrote: "In recent months, MPs have been piling pressure on Downing Street to step up and engage in a war on woke. The thinking goes that an unapologetic stance on issues ranging from alleged BBC bias and Extinction Rebellion to trans rights and Black Lives Matter could unite the base and remind voters that this is a Conservative government".[2]

On one level an agenda encompassing all these issues lacks any intellectual coherence. There is no intrinsic reason why, for example, somebody irritated by Extinction Rebellion's tactics would consider the BBC biased, nor is it clear what is inherently conservative about having one view or another on trans rights (given that the ability to self-identify one's gender is entirely compatible with individualism and a concern for personal liberty).

On another level, the lack of intellectual seriousness in this agenda does not really matter, as its proponents are suggesting it as a strategy to be pursued for political rather than public policy reasons. The aim is to frame the

contest between conservative and progressive ideas as being between 'common sense' and extremism.

Our analysis below highlights just how dangerous this culture war strategy is for progressives, because it is designed to leave them distracted, divided and demoralised. Before we come on to how that happens, it is first important to define terms.

Where does the term 'culture wars' come from?

The term 'culture wars' is itself, like much of the analysis that surrounds it, an American import which needs to be translated and adapted for a UK context.

US sociologist James Davison Hunter coined it in the 1990s as a way to describe disputes between traditional religious forces and more liberal co-religionists and secularists. In this understanding certain *kinds* of topics have a particular heat because culture is "about systems of meaning … why things are good, true and beautiful … Why things are right and wrong … the moral foundation of a political order".[3]

In his research, activists described their experiences of being on different sides of cultural concerns as feeling like being in a war because, in the end, they categorised their concerns as existential, concerning the very purpose and continuation of the nation.

One year later, failed presidential contender Pat Buchanan took the term mainstream when speaking at the Republican national convention, saying: "My friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we

shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America".[4]

It isn't an accident that the historical US trigger issues (school prayer, abortion, the right to bear arms) and the newer flashpoints (around commemoration of the confederacy and affirmative action in universities) all concern the boundaries of state authority and its legitimacy as the manifestation of national memory and identity. In British terms, academics Maria Sobolewska and Rob Ford call these the questions of "groups, boundaries and belonging".[5]

More recently American right populism has developed more of a quasi-spiritual element ('conspirituality', where new age wellness thinking meets conspiracism[6]), linked to volkish white supremacist ideologies.

In the US literature, therefore, culture wars questions can broadly be delineated as ones around who we *are*, not what we *do*, and there are often strong appeals to either religious or vaguely mystical sources of revealed, eternal authority.

What are the differences between other countries' culture wars and our own?

Over the last few decades, political scientists have charted the globalisation of the American culture wars and argued there has been a concerted attempt to export the narrative frames and organisational tactics of the US religious right to other contexts.[7]

That is particularly visible in the ways in which 'family values' have become a strong feature of anti-feminist and anti-LGBT backlashes in many countries[8] and in the UN. Here in the UK, there is some limited evidence that US organisations are promoting conversion therapy in Scotland[9] and abortion misinformation[10] in Northern

Ireland, but there is no evidence of anything remotely close to a US-style religious right in the UK.

Instead, Christians of all denominations are active across the political spectrum and you are far more likely to encounter someone saying their faith drew them into non-partisan work on international development or staffing the local food bank than you are to see people saying their faith has made them a strong right-of-centre partisan. In this country self-defined conservative Christian groups are small in number and enjoy limited policy influence.[11]

Moreover, the UK is not bifurcated along political identities to the same degree, and in the same way, as the United States. Voters are much less attached to their party identities, much happier floating between parties and sit much less predictably on a spectrum from traditionalist to progressive.[12] Instead, as Tim Dixon of More in Common argues, the clustering of different values tribes in the UK changes "from issue to issue, with British society resembling a kaleidoscope that changes its pattern and colours as we rotate … in stark contrast to the United States where the groups split the same way on issue after issue. In the UK there is a much broader consensus on some of the issues which most polarise the US including climate change, gender equality and racial justice".[13] Analysis by YouGov pollster Patrick English, for example, shows that there are majorities for teaching children about Britain's colonial past (73 per cent), for action on climate change being a government priority (63 per cent) and for the belief that a wide variety of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures is part of British culture (50 per cent) amongst Red Wall voters, much as there is amongst the wider population.[14]

Looking at events elsewhere in Europe may be similarly misleading. Historians and political scientists can disagree

about *why* the UK doesn't have a Christian Democrat tradition to mirror that found on the continent (the Theos think tank argues that "Britain never developed a tradition of Christian Democracy or a major Christian party because, by the time this happened in Europe, it already had three – Anglican Tory, Nonconformist Liberal, and Nonconformist and Catholic Labour"[15]), but the important point for our analysis is that it does not. That, alongside a sharp decline in those identifying as Christian in census and survey data,[16] means the UK broadly enjoys a sharp distinction between church and party, even if not church and state.

Instead we have, in the form of the Conservative party, perhaps the most intensely pragmatic (and therefore the most electorally successful) political party anywhere in the world.

One of the greatest strengths of the modern Conservative party is that it can draw on different intellectual traditions according to circumstance and know that the political and governing imperatives will nearly always trump the philosophical ones, even for their most fervent adherents.

We think this may partly explain why climate change, at least so far, has not become a front in the culture wars in the UK as it has elsewhere in the world. Given our right-of-centre tradition does not draw much, if any, of its animating force from religion, the battle between 'revealed' and scientific truth has no party political expression here.

Why are some people sceptical that the culture wars will take off in the UK?

If the above analysis of the origins and the contours of the culture wars is right, it suggests the UK should broadly have escaped the culture wars raging elsewhere.

That is certainly the view of some of the sharpest political observers. While research from the New Statesman's Ben Walker shows a 75 per cent increase in the number of mentions of 'culture wars' in British publications over the last 10 years, he is inclined to write that off as mostly UK coverage of US concerns, arguing that the "culture war in Britain has, so far, been waged mostly on the sidelines".[17] The latest research from King's College, however, suggests this is changing, noting that the number of articles in the UK media talking specifically about the culture wars in the UK jumped from just 21 in 2015 to 534 by 2020.[18]

Walker's New Statesman colleague Stephen Bush questions the likelihood of this strategy paying many dividends in any event, noting that none of the issues on which this fight is being fought enjoys very much salience with the British public.[19]

Likewise new research from More in Common reveals that most of the 'culture wars' noise is actually being generated by small groups on the political margins (noting that 80 per cent of tweets, for example, come from just 2 per cent of the population) and most people are exhausted and demoralised by a public debate they find fractious, negative and irrelevant to their day-to-day lives.[20]

Polling for Times Radio suggests, at the very least, a collective confusion, with 76 per cent of people saying they do not know what the term 'culture wars' means and only 4 per cent of people able to suggest a definition roughly in the right zone.[21]

Given all that, why do some people have a seemingly insatiable desire for culture wars stories and spats? In Part Two we will look at how the revenue and profile in peddling the culture wars is currently too attractive for various outlets and commentators to resist, but the bigger driver is undoubtedly the politicians and their advisors who believe there is an electoral dividend in this strategy.

To understand why people are willing to play this game, despite the risks inherent in an angrier and more divided society, we need to look at how the electoral coalitions for different parties have changed over the last half decade or more.

For some Conservative party strategists, the culture wars playbook is an indispensable part of holding together their winning electoral coalition post-Brexit. To understand this rationale, we need to understand what unites and, just as importantly, what divides Conservative and Labour factions.

Research conducted around the 2019 general election reveals that the Conservatives are deeply divided on economic questions.[22] For example, just 23 per cent of Conservative MPs and 22 per cent of party members agree that "ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth". This compares with 48 per cent of their voters. In fact, only 20 per cent of Conservative voters disagree with this statement, compared with the overwhelming majority of their MPs (65 per cent). By comparison, there is near universal support for this statement within Labour ranks, with 100 per cent of MPs, 95 per cent of members and 87 per cent of Labour voters agreeing with it.

This partly reflects a reality where the Conservatives have consistently picked up many more economically left-leaning voters in England in recent elections. In fact, academic Paula Surridge's analysis shows that 2019 was the first election since these values have been measured where the difference between the average Labour and Conservative voter on economics was smaller than the difference between them on social issues.[23] The government, conscious of being 'lent' these economically left-wing votes, has promised an ambitious 'levelling up' agenda to "spread opportunity to every corner of the UK".[24]

Given their economic divides, no plan equal to this rhetoric will simultaneously please Conservative MPs who by and large think ordinary people are already getting a fair share and the significant proportion of their voters who do not. On identity and history questions, however, the Conservatives are the ones in lockstep and it is Labour struggling to bridge a huge voter / activist divide. 74 per cent of Labour MPs and 59 per cent of their members disagree that "young people don't have enough respect for traditional British values", compared with just 29 per cent of 2019 Labour voters (which is to say, even among those voters loyal to the party even during a landslide loss).

Conservative strategists have noticed both this tension on the progressive side and the raw electoral appeal of the cultural campaign, with one northern Conservative MP noting to Isabel Hardman that "this sort of thing is very popular, which is why ministers are always giving interviews in front of flags and threatening 10-year prison sentences for insulting statues."[25]

Boris Johnson provided a foretaste of how the next election will be framed by the government in his 2020 party conference speech, saying; "We are proud of this country's

culture and history and traditions; they literally want to pull statues down, to rewrite the history of our country, to edit our national CV to make it look more politically correct. We aren't embarrassed to sing old songs about how Britannia rules the waves.''[26]

None of which is to say that the Conservatives will make the cultural campaign the sole or even a particularly prominent part of their short campaign or manifesto offers. Over the past decade, the Conservatives have really taken to heart election strategist Lynton Crosby's maxim "You can't fatten a pig on market day."[27] Much of what is happening now, therefore, is about doing early, strategic damage to the brand of progressive politics so that the messengers are rejected, regardless of what the policy vision from Labour ends up being.

This is not a partisan issue, but a question of strategy

Not all conservatives agree this is the right course. In his resignation letter, the prime minister's own senior adviser on ethnic minority affairs, Samuel Kasumu, said: "I fear for what may become of the [Conservative] party in the future by choosing to pursue a politics steeped in division … I fear that empathy is a word not conducive to the culture that has been developed and the damage that is often caused by our actions is not much considered."[28]

It is worth noting at this stage that the culture wars have links to, and overlap with, populism, but are a distinct phenomenon.

Populism, to use political scientist Cas Mudde's definition, is the idea that society is divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" and that politics should be an expression of the will

of the people (and therefore opponents aren't just wrong, but enemies of the people).

There are both left and right populists and plenty of people without partisan political affiliations who feel that elites are looking down their noses at them. The difference between populism and the culture wars in the UK, however, is that the latter are *elite phenomena.* This is why we talk about the culture wars in the UK as a strategy, rather than something that can be observed in communities. They are, in other words, real, just not authentic.

In Part Three, when we meet the culture wars peddlers, we will share examples of enthusiastic left participation in culture wars *once initiated*, but it is worth being clear at the outset that most of the examples we found in our research were of culture wars skirmishes being initiated by right-of-centre elites. This is not to deny, of course, that among more traditionalist public audiences the reverse can feel true. For those who feel bewildered by the rate of change and who are not quite sure who the arbiters of social norms are (and who they are accountable to), modern life can feel like one where progressives are starting the 'wars', or perhaps have already won them.

Part of the way through here is using clear definitions. Ours rests on three tests that can help us determine whether or not we are dealing with a culture wars issue (as opposed to a simply divisive or controversial one exploited by populists).

The three elements of the culture wars approach

There are broadly three tests which help illuminate the boundaries of the culture wars.

1. Is this about appealing to an 'in group' about how an 'out group' is undermining order or tradition?

In the original US academic framework, the first sign that a culture war was emerging was the extent to which battles over redistribution and resources were being supplanted by those over identity and authority, often bound up with appeals to history and tradition.

It is possible to see the beginnings of this trend in the UK. As historian David Olusoga notes: "In August [2020], the British Museum was denounced for adding information and gathering new artefacts … in order to contextualise, rather than merely memorialise, a prolific collector who gained much of his wealth from slavery. Weeks later, the National Trust was condemned when it revealed that many of the properties under its care have historical links to slavery or imperialism. Research projects and findings that just a few years ago would have drawn little public attention have been presented as *existential threats to the nation* and one version of national identity, the academics involved in them denounced in newspapers as *enemies within* for merely doing their jobs".[29] [Our emphasis].

The National Trust example Olusoga cites is an instructive one. The heritage body has been the subject of parliamentary questions, extensive media coverage and latterly demands that it attend a summit with the Culture Secretary, all because it has commissioned a report on the links between its properties and colonialism. Despite breathless warnings of a members' revolt, the regulator received just three complaints about the report and the trust received direct complaints from just 0.01 per cent of its membership.[30] Nonetheless, the 'row' has assumed outsized importance in the national conversation in part because history itself has become a contemporary political battle ground: ministers are

positioning themselves as 'defenders' of history (against who and what?) and the nation's pride, partly to frame any new attempts to expand the historical record as 'attacks' on history and, by implication, the nation and its people.

Professor Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory[31] helps explain what is going on here. In his telling (most famously in his book, The Righteous Mind), people broadly evaluate political or collective outcomes against five 'moral foundations', including those around respect for authority and traditions, loyalty to groups and sanctity. His argument is that leaders from the left-of-centre more often talk past large groups of voters because they simply do not embrace these three appeals to collective morality in the way most people do, preferring instead to focus almost exclusively on the other foundations ('care' and 'fairness') and their overlap with individual rights.

The reason culture wars politics is so effective is that it can touch on all five moral foundations, while giving particular comfort to more traditionalist voters who feel they are being ignored (or, even more potently, judged) by elites. Political psychologist Karen Stenner's work shows that this is a fairly large public constituency (made up of about one in three of us), with an authoritarian predisposition that gets triggered when we perceive threats to what she calls 'oneness and sameness'. This is not, in her view, the same as wanting ethnic homogeneity, instead it's about whether people are pulling together in a common project – a definition that helps explain why the authoritarian dynamic is as likely to be found in left-wing as right-wing voters.[32]

For those with an authoritarian predisposition, a general sense of unease about traditions or group norms being disrespected is then exacerbated when societies face periodic 'moral panics'. This concept, from sociologist Stan Cohen,

holds that periodic shifts in subcultures (think mods and rockers or rave culture) are whipped up into collective hysterias about large scale 'deviance'.[33]

In Cohen's framework, the two telltale signs of a moral panic are mutual amplification between politicians and the media and the projection of a threat posed by a minority out of all proportion to its size. It is not hard to see many of the hallmarks of a classic moral panic in at least some elements of today's debate about trans rights.[34]

Crucially, though, in these culture wars times these debates are given their power not simply by the appeals made to order and tradition, but by the second big test they prompt, around whether majority populations are being invited to think of society as a 'zero-sum' game.

2. Does this exploit fears in dominant groups that they are about to lose out?

In culture wars terms, this phenomenon plays out when dominant populations are told that a minority or marginalised group is getting a new right or benefit that somehow involves the majority group – *as a group* – losing out. That creates a sense that everything in life is zero-sum, that if someone is gaining, someone must be losing.

This in turn triggers both 'loss aversion' and 'inequity aversion', powerful cognitive biases that draw us closer to 'in groups'. The first occurs when we prioritise things we already have (either materially or in terms of status) more than even larger gains we could secure if we changed. The second describes our preference for the status quo, even if we would benefit under a different settlement, if we believe that someone else would benefit *more* and unfairly.

These powerful drivers can help explain the rise of populist politics in countries that by both historical and international standards are performing reasonably well economically.

University of Chicago economists Lubos Pastor and Pietro Veronesi think this partly explains the rise of populist politics 'in rich countries and good times'.[35] In their model, voters in the US and UK know that protectionist policies will restrict their own access to cheap consumer goods, but also that "such restrictions hurt economic elites in particular" and that this appeals to a post-crash sense that the very wealthy game the system.

This may also partly explain Karen Stenner's finding that "when economic threats prove significant (in the data about what drives populism), they almost always involve perceptions of national economic decline rather than household financial distress".[36] In other words, people's perceptions and experiences of globalisation, and what it means for them as *group members*, not simply individuals, drives an obsessive fixation on getting 'what we deserve', *in relation to other groups.*

Taken together, zero-sum thinking, loss aversion and inequity aversion create a powerful sense of thwarted entitlement – that people are losing things they had been led to believe would be theirs.

Sociologist Michael Kimmel lays out this thesis best with reference to his appearance on a US chat show: "I first encountered what I came to call angry white men in the late 1990s, when I was asked to appear on a television talk show opposite three guys who felt they had been the victims of workplace discrimination. The title of this particular show was a quote from one of these men: A Black Woman Stole My Job. After each man had told his story, the attention turned towards me. 'Well, professor,' the host asked. 'What do you

have to say to these men?' I said I had just one question for them, and it was about the quote that served as the show's title. Actually it was a question about one word in the title. The word 'my'. What made this guy think it was his job? Why wasn't the episode called 'A Black Woman Got the Job' or 'A Black Woman Got a Job'?".[37]

This, then, is what really gives the strategy of triggering loss aversion in dominant groups its truly toxic edge: it depends upon the idea that something of value is not simply being lost but *taken*.

It is worth dwelling on this point about thwarted entitlement for a moment because progressives tend to focus on it in purely financial terms instead of thinking, as most voters do, about their 'lot in life' being a combination of material factors and ones around status and relationships to others.

Research by Professor Tressie McMillan Cottom and colleagues in the US is illuminating here. In examining rising mortality, morbidity (eg chronic pain or hypertension) and substance misuse (especially opioid and alcohol misuse) amongst working-age white Americans – cumulatively often dubbed rising 'deaths of despair' – they found that these increases were not closely correlated with absolute economic markers. The clearest sign of this was that while the working-age white population's economic circumstances had worsened over both the short and long term, this was also true of the Black population who had not seen similar rises in mortality (despite absolute rates starting from a much worse position). Instead, they found there was a much closer correlation with rising poor health among white people who perceived their status was falling relative to Black people. This was despite the actual relative economic success of the white and Black populations being unchanged.[38]

Related research on voting patterns found that President Trump's support was far more correlated with people *feeling* left behind rather than *being* (relatively at least) left behind (and there are perhaps parallels in research highlighting that the typical Leave voter was comfortably well-off).[39]

Culture wars peddlers understand how status anxiety shapes behaviour and, as we will see in Part Three, are skilled at weaving grievances into powerful narratives that turn people against each other. This task is made a lot easier when the media amplify daft stories in ways that inflame tensions.

3. Is something minor, marginal or made up being amplified way beyond its importance?

The 2020 row about the Proms is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Controversy erupted when the BBC decided that it would not be appropriate to have guests sing Rule Britannia at the end of the concert series, as is traditional, given the documented risk of spreading coronavirus through collective singing. This was widely reported as a response to Black Lives Matter protests, despite nobody associated with the movement requesting any such thing, and nobody involved in the decision referencing racial justice as a factor.[40] The basis for this claim and the extensive TV and radio talking head discussions that followed was one seemingly uncorroborated anonymous source purporting to be from the BBC.

It is not an accident that culture wars peddlers wanted to pull the debate on to this terrain: various polls have found just under half the country support the Black Lives Matter protests. For example, June 2020 Opinium polling for the Observer found 49 per cent of the public supported the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK (a further 28 per cent said

they were neutral or did not know). By contrast, a YouGov poll for the Times in August 2020 found just 16 per cent of people supported Rule Britannia being played without its lyrics.[41] Polling for HOPE Not Hate found that 65 per cent of Black, Asian and minority ethnic respondents felt that the debate around pulling down historical monuments with racist links has distracted from important discussions on racism in Britain. Only 12 per cent disagreed.[42]

The impact of these kinds of stories is to reframe the whole Black Lives Matter movement as being primarily about issues like this, leaving the casual observer thinking "all these street protests because you don't like old songs or statues?" It all adds up to what NEON calls a strategy to "diminish, decontextualise and delegitimise issues that might affect minority or marginalised groups".[43]

The same approach is evident in universities minister Michelle Donelan's outlandish claim that the study of history might somehow become "fiction, if you start editing it, taking bits out that we view as stains. If we're going down this road of taking bits out, are we then going to end up putting bits in that we wish had happened?".[44] There is, of course, absolutely no evidence that university history departments are 'taking bits of history out', far less 'putting bits in'.

This is merely the strangest example of the government's wider obsession with universities which seem to perform the same narrative role in current conservative storytelling as 'loony left' councils did in the 1980s. The Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, has announced plans to ensure freedom of speech on campus, something that is already protected under law[45] and which comes as a response to a 'free speech crisis' claim which bears no scrutiny. Higher education think tank WonkHE surveyed students' unions across England in 2020 and found that there

had been 10,000 events featuring external speakers in the previous year and permission had been refused for just six of them (largely because the relevant student societies had been incompetent in using the booking system).[46]

Likewise, it is striking that the Department for Housing, Communities and Local Government has launched a review about the provision of women's toilets, without citing a single bit of evidence in support of their claim that the increased provision of gender-neutral toilets has meant that "women are reluctant to go out or take trips".[47]

In each case, made-up or significantly exaggerated claims have been injected into the national conversation by either political or media decision-makers who know that simplistic, binary narratives that pit 'common sense' against 'extremism' will always garner attention.

The culture war in the UK is primarily a strategy, not a set of issues or values divides

This point bears repetition as it is one of the key ways in which the UK and US culture wars differ. In the US, the culture wars divides reflect deep and enduring differences on values questions *among* the public (even if those divides are amplified by politicians and in the media), whereas in the UK this is primarily an elite project where those with political and media power are actively trying to raise the salience of these issues *with* the public.

That is why UK analysis of the culture wars often falls down when it tries to clarify which issues are in or out of scope by looking for consistent and predictable values divides that simply do not show up in the data.

We sympathise with how the confusion arises: one of us wrote in a Times Red Box comment piece introducing

the 2018 British Social Attitudes survey report that "We are increasingly on the same page when it comes to social issues. Back in the late 1980s almost half of us felt a woman's job was to look after the home and family, and a man's job to earn. That's now just 8 per cent and the gap in these views between young and old people is closing fast. We see the same pattern in view on same sex relationships and abortion. If you are looking for a 'culture war' you won't find one here".[48]

What we missed at the time was how *the culture wars strategy is not really about the issues.* As we come on to in more detail in Part Two, the culture wars are primarily a strategy to distract, divide and demoralise opponents: if certain issues no longer lend themselves to this approach then other ones are substituted.

There are parallels here with the promotion of the idea that benefit fraud is widespread. Analysis in 2012 by Ben Baumberg, Kate Bell and Declan Gaffney found that although there were some examples of the media independently highlighting individual cases of suspected fraud, the vast majority of the coverage ultimately stemmed from politicians placing untrue or exaggerated stories for partisan advantage.[49]

More recent analysis of culture war news stories by the Policy Institute at King's College also found that it is far more common to find elites – particularly in politics, the media and universities – being portrayed as the main protagonists in the culture wars, rather than cultural struggles being experienced in everyday life.[50] The culture wars are often written about or even analysed as a bottom-up feature of British life when, in reality, it is very much a top-down strategy where both politicians and media decision-makers have allied incentives.

The media is fanning the culture wars as much as reporting them

It would be easy for people who feel repelled and exhausted by the culture wars to conclude that a changing of the guard in politics would make this problem go away. That is, unfortunately, fatally naive about the new 'news economy'.

Even with a prime minister or entire government of a different political perspective, the ratings incentives provided by outrage[51] and algorithmically determined social media feeds would continue pushing us towards what ex-Times journalist Martin Fletcher calls the "Foxification of the British media"[52] on the right and a further mushrooming of outrage outlets on the left.

All the indications are that GB News has identified and intends to grow a large market for culture wars stories (it has, for example, promised a regular 'wokewatch' segment[53]) and Twitter in particular is set to play an increasing – and highly distortionary – role because of the concentration of journalists and highly motivated but ultimately unrepresentative activists on the platform. For lazy commentators and time-pressed producers it is easy to scroll through and find a clear binary in complex debates and identify readily caricatured opponents who can be treated as a proxy for huge groups of voters who are actually confused, indifferent, persuadable, or all three.

In this way, media bookers are further exacerbating trends which social media feeds off. Work by the University of Warwick and Indiana University charts how social media (especially Twitter) perpetuates a dangerous minefield of cognitive biases. We are, for example, more likely to share negative rather than positive stories and to respond to information overload by sorting ourselves into (and deferring

to the information from) our 'in-group', leaving us with a distorted view of the other 'side'.[54]

This is a problem for anybody who wants nuanced public policy debate but it is a particular problem for progressives because, by definition, they seek to disrupt the status quo. As journalist Marie Le Conte puts it: "Groups seeking to change public opinion and policy know they have some convincing to do. Instead of demanding whatever endpoint they hope will be reached eventually – be that entirely green societies or full parity between genders – they must take it step by step … to take people with them. At the same time, they must be able to discuss further steps between themselves and hash out their ideal vision of society with their in-group. Because social media squashes everyone together, this is no longer possible. Instead, it has become easy for malicious actors to cherry pick the more far-fetched ideas and paint them as the true goal of nefarious radicals".[55]

That cherry picking effect is then exacerbated when those who want to frame debates in the starkest terms (and/or those least favourable to progressives) can point to fringe voices *anywhere in the world* as somehow representing a pole in a British debate. As journalist Helen Lewis points out, LBC, Talk Radio and the BBC all had to approach an American in Philadelphia when they wanted to stage a row about white singer Adele's 'cultural appropriation' in knotting her hair and wearing a Jamaican flag bikini.[56]

This is not, then, an issue progressives can just sit out while they wait for a turning of the parliamentary tide. Whichever party forms the next government, all parties are going to have to contend with a media landscape and a social media world with a large and growing appetite for these kinds of debates. In Part Two we will look at why that poses a particular problem for progressives.

Summary of Part One

- The term 'culture wars' initially came from the United States and was traditionally used to describe deep-seated divides on values, particularly those stemming from religion.
- The culture wars in the UK do not fit this pattern, in part because religion plays a much less important role in our national life.
- Here in the UK the culture wars are much more to do with securing partisan advantage.
- The culture wars are therefore best thought of as a political strategy pursued by elites, not a genuine set of deep divides in communities.
- The three tests of whether the culture wars playbook is being deployed are: i) are appeals being made to order and tradition? ii) are fears being stoked in dominant groups that they are about to lose out? and iii) is something minor, marginal or made-up being used to stoke division?

Despite all the community spirit and kindness we have seen during the pandemic, we face enormous social pressures in this country. A loneliness epidemic, tech platforms profiting from misinformation, intergenerational strains as children and young people shoulder a huge burden to keep the rest of us safe from Covid and the unequal distribution of the sickness and grief associated with coronavirus are all tugging us away from one another. These are perfect conditions for culture wars peddlers to sell their wares.

In Part One, we have looked at what the culture wars are. In Part Two, we will look at how the culture wars are designed to distract, divide, demoralise and ultimately defeat progressive ideas and movements.

The culture wars distract us

On one level, it should not matter very much what people choose to prioritise when making political decisions. After all, the whole point of living in a democracy is not only that people are entitled to make whatever choice they want, they are entitled to make it on whatever basis they want too.

The problem is that there is an extreme social cost to everybody when our attention is drawn away from things

that impact on all of us: distraction is ultimately a problem because it stops policies being subject to the kind of scrutiny that would refine and improve them.

This is not, it is worth stressing, simply a critique mounted by the left about the right. Among the government's critics are Claire Foges, a former adviser to David Cameron, who argues: "These easy-to-digest stories are a useful distraction from the government's handling of the pandemic. Like sleight-of-hand magicians, they hold up something sparkly in the shape of a row about statues while trying to sweep corona-disasters under the carpet."[57] and former Conservative minister Ed Vaizey who has branded "the whole kind of anti-woke agenda being pursued by the government … absolutely pathetic".[58]

Spectator Deputy Editor Katy Balls summarised the essence of the culture wars as "unconscious bias training, non-binary pronouns, the renaming of institutions and microaggressions" but what is more interesting for our purposes is the quote from an anonymous MP in the same article: "We should start the conversation on British values and lead it. It's that or the current approach where we end up having to talk about how rubbish we are at testing".[59]

The use of these kinds of issues as a decoy to distract attention from policy delivery is one thing, but the strategy takes a very ugly turn when the politics of distraction combine with the politics of division.

The culture wars divide us

The divisive nature of the culture wars manifests in two main ways.

The first is when activists for social justice splinter into factions more obsessed with one another than ending the injustice that is their common cause.

The controversy about the Ministerial Maternity and Other Allowances Bill is an illustrative example. In this instance, legislation designed to make it possible for the Attorney General to take maternity leave was drafted to be gender neutral (in line with a legislative drafting convention created in 2007), by using the term 'pregnant people'. There is absolutely no evidence this drafting was, as critics claimed, "part of a wider assault on women's rights from transgender activists who seek to deny the reality of sex"[60] but that didn't stop a debate about a different question entirely (in this case about whether members of the cabinet should have to resign ministerial office when taking maternity leave) descending into an ill-tempered fight about the rights of a tiny and marginalised minority. Once the debate was dragged on to that terrain, trans-inclusive feminists felt (rightly, in our view) duty bound to join in, making the case that recognising the rights of trans parents was in fact a happy by-product of the drafting, even if it was not the original intent.

The wider question, though, is who benefits when debates between feminists become ferocious and unforgiving? It is not average women, whether they are cis or trans. The movement for gender equality is weakened not only because the watching audience is alienated and confused by jargon-filled debates which both assume and require a high degree of prior knowledge, but because activists themselves become demoralised and burnt out.

In her campaign to move from a 'call out' to a 'call in' culture, where people invite each other to reconsider their views rather than publicly shaming one another, Professor Loretta J. Ross warns of this 'unrestrained anger' that too

often characterises activism: "I think we actually sabotage our own happiness with this … I have to honestly ask: Why are you making choices to make the world crueller than it needs to be and calling that being 'woke'?".[61]

Eric Ward, senior fellow at Southern Poverty Law Center in the US, sums up the risk for progressives of becoming readily caricatured by their enemies as obscurantist cliques fighting about theoretical abstractions in place of everyday concerns this way: "On the third anniversary of Unite the Right in Charlottesville … my phone is blowing up with an 'open letter to progressives' signed by dozens of movement organizations taking down another organization … Right here, right now, is this internal call-out the critical fight to have? What does the fixation on ideological purity do for the children sitting in US immigration detention jail cells? What does it bode for our capacity to bring people along to a truly inclusive vision of reality when we devote so much energy towards splintering an already small sector of progressive activists with purity tests?".[62]

The rise of a 'call-out' culture in campaigning movements is itself, in part, a function of increased polarisation. As activists retreat to echo chambers and spend more of their time trying to mobilise those who already agree rather than persuade those with remaining doubts, a narcissism of small differences effect is almost inevitable. This is certainly what Cass Sunstein finds in his study of 'group polarisation', a phenomenon whereby people's views become more extreme the more like-minded their companions. In contrast, time spent in groups of divergent views tends to breed empathy and the hunt for common ground.[63]

The second manifestation of the politics of division is the attempt to fracture the public constituency for economic reforms which could actually close some of the gaps between

us. The idea that there is a distinction between 'identity politics' and class, and that we need more of the latter and less of the former, is a trap created to sow division by implying that politics is a zero-sum fight between irreconcilable communities.

To understand the nature of this trap we first need to recognise how identity politics is something forced on communities, as Stacey Abrams has laid out so powerfully: "(Some) argue that by calling out ethnic, cultural, gender, or sexual differences, marginalized groups harm themselves and their causes. By enumerating and celebrating distinctions, the argument goes, they give their opponents reasons for further excluding them. But minorities and the marginalized have little choice but to fight against the particular methods of discrimination employed against them. The marginalized did not create identity politics: their identities have been forced on them by dominant groups, and politics is the most effective method of revolt."[64]

The identity politics versus class framing also disguises two points. Firstly, it both wrongly assumes identity questions are solely cultural and not also material ones (belied by the data around how race, disability and low income intersect[65, 66]) and that class is purely a material question rather than also one of identity. Secondly, that the phrase 'traditional working-class' is often employed as cover for the idea that working-class people are all white, able-bodied, straight men (and, moreover, that working-class white, able-bodied, straight men do not know or care about the people in their families, workplaces and neighbourhoods who do not conform to that identity).

Many of those that fall into the identity-politics-versus-class trap see themselves as champions of social and economic justice 'daring' to speak hard truths to their own

side. The clue that they may instead have fallen into a trap is when they find themselves newly championed by people who never previously seemed much troubled by questions of class inequality. This is most obvious when we consider the sudden uptick of concern around the educational attainment of white, working-class boys.

As journalist Kenan Malik charts, issues of educational attainment "have little to do with being white and much to do with being working-class. At GCSEs, black pupils receiving free school meals (FSM) – a proxy for poverty – score around 17 per cent less than black students not on free school meals. So do Asian pupils. For white pupils, though, the gap is double – 34 Per cent. The real problem, in other words, lies less in differences between ethnic groups than in the chasm of inequality within the white population, between working-class and middle-class students".[67]

Lord Simon Woolley, of Operation Black Vote and a previous chair of No 10's race disparity unit, goes further, arguing "part of this government's "radical" plan is to frame the debate …in a way that labels Black Lives Matter and other race equality campaigners and educators as somehow conspiring against white people".[68]

According to research from Sanjiv Lingayah, Elena Blackmore and Bec Sanderson for the Runnymede Trust and Voice4Change, this strategy is not quite working yet.[69] Instead of a looming white backlash, they find large areas of consensus between activist and public opinion. Both groups agree that it is important to defeat racism and stop it being replicated across generations, recognising its roots in both national history and powerful institutions.

The culture war demoralises us

Division in political debate is of course, inevitable, and to some extent desirable: in tackling big issues like stark economic inequality and climate change no proposals are going to please everyone.

What, however, marks culture wars divisions out as different and deeply worrying is the attempt to polarise along identity rather than policy lines. While this can occasionally, as in the case of the Women's March, sometimes have the effect of galvanising marginalised communities and increasing their sense of agency and power, it can just as often have the opposite effect, of exhausting people and making them leave the public square altogether.

Glitch, the charity working to end online abuse, reports it has "gathered many testimonials from women rethinking a career in public life after witnessing the abuse meted out to politicians who look similar to them".[70] Amnesty International research into the online abuse experienced by politicians and journalists in both the UK and US shows it is significantly more prevalent for Black women.[71]

One of the ways this silencing strategy works is by doing forms of linguistic judo that rob activists and advocates of the very language they would use to describe their experiences. You can see this play out, for example, in arguments that it is *talking* about inequality – rather than inequality itself – that divides people.

This linguistic trick is played, as writer Nesrine Malik notes: "To diminish the moral power of demands for racial equality and social justice … and to depict them as a militant threat to life as we know it, rather than a belated and in fact extremely fragile attempt to secure basic rights."[72]

Professor Bob Clifford, who studies transnational activism for both liberal and illiberal ends, has concluded that the adoption of the language of human rights is a deliberate

strategy on the part of illiberal actors to both advance their agendas and split liberal coalitions.[73] An example here is the invocation of so-called 'parents' rights' when opposing LGBT-inclusive sex education, even though no such group of rights has ever been codified in human rights laws or frameworks.

All of these linguistic contortions add up to an attempt to make their opponents – people pursuing causes with strong public support – seem unreasonable. Even if the tricks do not manage to convince every member of the audience, they can leave some onlookers feeling exhausted and wishing a plague on both sides' houses.

Worse, it also actively harms the very people whose voices most need to be heard and listened to on sensitive questions of identity. It is, by design, very difficult to take on a bad faith opponent who mangles language in this way or who has set out with the singular and express purpose of trolling and taunting people from minorities. The result is often a tsunami of online abuse and threats, with devastating consequences for the health and wellbeing of people advocating on the basis of their lived experience.

David Lammy MP has been rightly praised for his extraordinary self-possession and eloquence when dealing with a radio caller questioning his Englishness, but how much *more* impressive is it when we consider that, at the time, he would have been perfectly well aware that a radio producer sitting feet away had specifically selected that caller in order to engineer that very 'debate'?[74]

Many of the communication tools progressives use to make their case, from their media training and social media strategies to single issue framing methodologies, simply do not equip them for these ugly, exhausting, demoralising experiences. Too often spokespeople are left to process this

alone, without aftercare or support in reporting credible threats of harm. In Part Four we will look at some practical ways this could be improved and in the next Part we will meet some of their adversaries so that progressive know what – and who – they are up against.

Summary of Part Two

- Culture wars act as a kind of decoy, diverting attention from substantive policy issues which need to be addressed.
- Culture wars are divisive in two very specific ways that differentiate these issues from topics that are merely controversial. Firstly, they exploit small differences between activists in ways that create fractures in movements for change. Secondly, they fracture the public constituency for social change, particularly by suggesting that the interests of ethnic minorities and white working-class people are divergent rather than shared.
- Finally, culture wars demoralise those pushing for change because they render the public square toxic, especially for marginalised people.

One of the reasons culture wars peddlers can be hard to identify is nobody really wants to admit to being one. Plenty of the people adopting the three strategies above (of making appeals to tradition, promoting zero-sum thinking and inflaming tensions through magnifying fringe concerns) would say they were simply raising the 'legitimate concerns' of a silent (or silenced) majority. Some go further and argue that it is in fact they who are the *victims* of culture wars. Indeed one group of MPs, the so-called 'Common Sense Group', has set itself an explicit objective of battling the 'woke' agenda, casting themselves as a bulwark against an agenda pursued by others.[75]

In this part we will try to bring the culture wars peddlers into sharper relief, differentiating the different motivations and preoccupations of three different groups.

Meet the grievance mongers

This group is united in seeing the electoral utility of a politics of grievance but uses it to advance radically different policy agendas.

On the right, this strategy tends to be used to drive a wedge between constituencies that might otherwise form coalitions of support around interventionist economic policy.

In the United States this was historically associated with Richard Nixon and his 'Southern strategy', designed to pull the support of white working-class people away from the progressive New Deal and Great Society policy settlements through mobilising racial resentment.

In the UK, some saw echoes of Nixon's grievance-based strategy in the 2017 election, with Aditya Chakrabortty arguing in April that year that: "It is delusional to treat this as just another vote, when Theresa May and her outriders are intent on turning it into a culture war."[76] The latest version of it is No 10's supposed 'war on woke',[77] designed to nail on the support of those Red Wall voters the PM believes 'lent' their votes to the Conservatives but who do not share their economic diagnoses nor prescriptions.

On the left, a politics of grievance is more generally directed in a clumsy way towards 'London', a word which journalist Jonn Elledge explains "often doesn't refer to a city or its inhabitants. It refers instead to, variously, Westminster, Whitehall, the Conservative party, the Home Counties, the establishment, or the ruling class".[78] This framing, of course, both animates Scottish nationalism and has been an increasing feature of the political positioning of Labour's metro mayors. In both instances the narrative can end up fusing real policy objections to the centralisation and lack of responsiveness of the British state with a populist willingness to 'other' people, including low-income and marginalised people, living in the capital. The unhelpful and untrue implication is that ordinary northerners and Scots have little common cause with the significant proportion of Londoners who have at least as much (if not more) reason to feel forgotten by the national government.

Meet the perpetually outraged

The second group are those who profit – at least in the short term – from the cacophony of the culture wars. These benefits can either be direct and individual, accruing to those who have been able to monetise their online content or develop new full-time careers as provocateurs, or indirect and organisational, building a following, readership or fundraising list that can get readily whipped up whenever there are fresh examples of outrages committed by the other 'side'.

It is worth saying at this point that many people in this camp are often sincere in their convictions. The fact that the positions they take and strategies they adopt also benefit them doesn't detract from the fact they may earnestly believe they are doing the right thing by wider society or a campaign or cause they care passionately about.

As campaign strategists Ali Goldsworthy and Rob Blackie argue, much of this is simply a function of the internal logic of how online attention is garnered and maintained: "Measuring progress and success in clicks and shares encourages the simplification of complex issues in order to maximise outrage … The message tends to be that a serious and urgent crisis is being caused by bad people – people who, faced with a simple moral choice, have decided to choose the obviously immoral option."[79]

Campaigning plans, then, often don't simply reinforce but *depend upon* the creation of them-and-us dynamics, ones which create what Larger Us founder Alex Evans describes as a terrible feedback loop between our state of mind and the state of the world.[80] All of this happens at the same time as "social media (and news media too, for that matter) excels at pushing the most extreme, angry, threatening views from the other side at us – because it's great for monetising our attention. But it's often not a representative picture. It can

make our differences seem more insurmountable than they are. And by triggering our own sense of threat, it embeds us more in our own tribal identities, with the potential that we become part of the problem too."

While we have been unable to find any examples of progressive culture wars peddlers (on the definition we are using), culture wars are certainly embraced with enthusiasm on the left *once initiated.* Indeed Andrew Tenzer and Ian Murray's Empathy Delusion report suggests a much *higher* concentration of highly polarised and tribal voices on the left, quoting data that suggest "one in five (19 per cent) of those who identify as Conservative would be upset if their child married a Labour voter, whereas 28 per cent of those who identify as Labour would be upset if the situation were reversed. Research published by the University of Kent found that 80 per cent of Leave voters would have a Remainer as a friend, but only 61 per cent of Remainers would have a Leaver as a friend".[81]

King's College research shows how this self-righteousness plays out on the left: "74 per cent of Labour supporters consider Conservative voters to be selfish – more than twice the 30 per cent of Conservatives who say the same about Labour voters. Labour supporters are also more likely to describe Conservatives as closed-minded (75 per cent vs 59 per cent) and hypocritical (67 per cent vs 52 per cent) than the reverse, and half as likely to see them as honest (25 per cent vs 50 per cent) than the other way around".[82]

This chimes with findings from researcher Chris Clarke who suggests that left politics is often characterised by "a form of tribalism, which treats the political spectrum as a moral spectrum. This approach assumes the left is where virtue lies, and that self-interest and spite are the only reasons why anyone would take a different view".[83] Clarke suggests

these are long-standing vulnerabilities in left thinking but it is worth noting how they play out in a social media age, particularly when left activists and political journalists are concentrated on Twitter as a platform.

More in Common research points to "the commanding role of progressive activists on social media", noting that "they are culturally influential, and are six times more likely to post about politics on Twitter and other social media platforms than any other group".[84] This segment makes up only 13 per cent of the population but supplies many more talk show guests than that, a function of both supply and demand.

In some cases, 'progressive activists' are indeed enthusiastically engaging in media debates where they are significantly at odds with public opinion, but there are also plenty of instances where media outlets are pushing stories in which no spokesperson for the supposed 'woke' side is to be found.

Journalist and author Yomi Adegoke has charted one illustrative example, the recurring story that the film Grease faces being 'cancelled'.[85] The root of these stories is a handful of tweets, many made in jest, making uncontroversial points about the ways in which the 1978 script is dated. This has been the flimsy basis for a wide variety of outlets profiling this 'controversy', including the Daily Mail, Good Morning Britain, the Metro and Pink News. While these individual stories may seem harmless, they add up to the impression – inadvertent or otherwise – that movements like #MeToo are obsessed with trivia about musicals instead of, in reality, existing to counter violence against women.

The economic logic for commercial outlets to chase these kinds of arresting but nonsensical stories around the internet is clear: division is dramatic and provides readers with talking

points with friends and family and it is unbelievably cheap and quick to piece together a few outraged (or outrageous) social media posts to fill out a story if you are a print journalist or producer under pressure from the latest round of cuts. There is, however, no particularly good reason for the BBC to, as journalist Stephen Bush argues about Politics Live, indulge in "a near-unfiltered mainlining of the most acrid and arid Twitter debates onto television and into millions of homes".[86] The BBC, as a public service broadcaster, should be a bulwark against the professionally outraged but increasingly its guest bookers and producers rely on them to fill space and generate attention as part of a wider race to the bottom.

Meet the trolls

This group pulls together lots of different players who may have diverse motivations, but have a common playbook.

In her analysis of the growth of the alt-right and 'incel' movements on social media and niche platforms like 4chan, author Angela Nagel notes that for many of the young men drawn in, the initial attraction is not ideology or issues but the thrill of being transgressive. This thrill chasing, typically done under the cover of offensive posts being just a joke or ironic, soon shifts the person's personal beliefs into alignment with their racist and misogynistic 'LOLs'.[87] The Center for Countering Digital Hate's Imran Ahmed goes further, exploring how trolls want more than to amuse themselves and gain kudos in their niche online community – they actively enjoy seeing others wounded emotionally, a phenomenon known as 'negative social potency'.[88]

This, of course, does not come from nowhere. While Karen Stenner, quoted earlier, has found there is

a latent authoritarianism in many of us, political scientist Michael Bang Petersen has found that there is also a latent desire for chaos in many of us too, and that "a need for chaos emerges when a personality that craves status is also experiencing social marginalisation".[89]

A final group of trolls are those working for malign foreign actors to promote division, although it is important not to overstate the extent of their impact.

While these groupings represent the most visible and extreme examples, it is the willingness of mainstream politicians to dance with them, and of media gatekeepers and decision-makers to amplify them, that mean they have such a dangerous and distortionary effect on our politics.

When the powerful are increasingly willing to ride this particular tiger and we, through our own social media consumption and behaviour, are increasingly rewarding them for doing so, we are all complicit in creating a future none of us actually benefit from.

In Part Four we will look at what it would take to build a different kind of politics instead, one where people are brought together to deliver real, sustainable, progressive change.

Summary of Part Three

- There are three main groups of culture wars 'peddlers'.
- The grievance mongers fuel resentment of people who are different by virtue of what they are like or where they are from, for political gain.
- The perpetually outraged gain money, support and attention from all the ways culture war anger drives our behaviour.
- The trolls benefit from seeing other people in pain.

So far we have looked at what the culture wars are really about, why progressives should not join in and what traps the culture wars peddlers are laying. In this final section we want to focus on what the rest of us should do if we want to build a stronger sense of social solidarity instead.

It is worth saying at the outset that the wider field of depolarisation is not yet at maturity, with established players with clear theories of change and differentiated positioning. We think organisations and initiatives in this space can be broadly categorised into four groups – those which think the answer is rebuilding a centre somewhere equidistant from polarised extremes without any diagnosis of what might have pulled people towards those extremes in the first place; those which think the strategic task is containing this problem on the political right; those which think it is containing it on the political left and those which think the underlying cleavages can be largely wished away and that if people from radically different perspectives encounter each other often enough the underlying fractures will heal.

Our own starting point is different: we are primarily interested in building a broad and diverse constituency that can work together to deliver real change in communities. In a previous report, Our Other National Debt, we looked at the injustices that have been exposed and exacerbated

by the pandemic.[90] Our starting point then was that really big changes are needed to how our country works, if we are to repay our debts to those who have sacrificed or suffered a disproportionate amount in this time. Our starting point now is that changes of that magnitude only get made and sustained if they are backed by indivisible and irresistible coalitions of support.

In this section we try to lay out what the four pillars of a strategy to build that coalition could be.

PILLAR ONE
Set out a vision of the future we can all see ourselves in

One of the reasons the culture wars have been able to occupy so much space in our national debate is that the major political parties are not laying out their own exciting visions of the future.

Both the PM's blustering when asked about whether Joe Biden was 'woke' and Keir Starmer's stumbles over both Black Lives Matter (when he called the movement a moment[91]) and the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory (when taking calls on a radio phone-on[92]) reveal men who haven't yet fully worked out what positive projects they want their tenures to be defined by, beyond getting something 'done' and putting their party 'under new management'. Both are struggling with what they should *say*, because they don't seem to have worked out what they *think*.

It adds up to what commentator Steve Richards calls 'artlessness'[93] or what those in the advertising industry would dismiss with the jibe 'your strategy is showing'. We have seen this play out time and again, with politicians and activists both paying for marketing research to be turned into messaging scripts, which are then treated as spells

which simply need to be incanted often enough to get everyone to agree with them. Both of us have spent careers commissioning insight work and translating the results into messaging guides and winning frames but what is needed in a culture wars time is better stories, not better scripts.

That in turn depends on an inspiring vision of what our multi-national, multi-racial, multi-generational country could become. In 2018, to mark the 50th anniversary of Robert Kennedy's run for the presidency, the Century Foundation's Richard D. Kahlenberg charted how the options to bring periodic voters into the political system are not simply a race-blind economic populism that ignores the concerns of ethnic minority voters, nor a white supremacist politics that weaponises the *existence* of ethnic minority voters, but instead a third path which offers "a liberalism without elitism and a populism without racism".[94]

Such a strategy, Kahlenberg argues, is what lay behind Kennedy's ability to build "a powerful coalition of working-class whites and blacks, even as race riots were raging across the country" and at a time when racist attitudes were far more prevalent and acceptable among white voters than they are today.

That was possible because the candidate was clear where he stood – for civil rights, against looting, against the war and against draft dodging. This is both a coherent message and a popular one and it landed well because it was so obviously what the candidate believed. Crucially, for our purposes, it was a message in which the economy had primacy but was not the sum total of the offer.

For today's progressives the task is similar. For campaign strategist Steve Akehurst it is "to find a consistent story about what unites voters in all battlegrounds: one of patriotic national renewal based on economic justice, and the

redistribution of economic power. One which tries to raise the salience of economic issues over culture … finding a way to not totally abandon the field on cultural issues, but also not unduly raising their importance".[95]

That is much easier said than done, but it is essential. We cannot hope to tackle the challenges of this decade, like transforming the economy, tackling racism and heading off the worst of our climate emergency, without public support that stretches across our cities, towns and villages. Here are some thoughts about what progressives should do next.

First, lay out a vision of the future economy which is inspiring enough to gather a new, mass public constituency *and* show a plausible path to how it might come about. Heather McGhee, author of The Sum of Us, argues that the latter is particularly important when the salience of racism and racial injustice has been raised, as has happened in the UK following the publication of the Sewell Report.

McGhee's argument is that the risk of alerting white people to the extensive and myriad ways in which they are beneficiaries of a racial hierarchy can add up to something akin to 'an advert for racism' and that the only way to get white people to give up those benefits is to show them how quickly and tangibly the benefits of an alternative will be felt.[96] For UK progressives that will mean focusing as much time on prosecuting the case that a future of green jobs, fairer taxes and a strengthened safety net is *possible* as they do arguing that it is desirable. Credibility on the economy matters more, not less, when challenging a culture wars strategy.

Strategists working on this challenge in the US have also found that culture wars frames are so deeply embedded that progressives need explicitly to correct for it in their message. Their research found that culture war messaging

had so consistently told white working-class people that progressives are not on their side that messages about equality were assumed to be about delivering for other groups. Likewise, a message about how a policy would benefit everyone didn't resonate with African-Americans who had been cast beyond the 'circle of everyone' by segregation and other forms of exclusion. Instead, researchers found support for progressive policies could only be guaranteed across the groups when each was explicitly mentioned by name.[97] It merits testing whether something similar is needed here in the UK to make people from different backgrounds and different places know that policy has been designed with all of us in mind. One option may be to do as President Biden has done and reframe proposed investment as infrastructure. One of the reasons that has paid such dividends for the Democrats is that infrastructure is, by definition, a public good where all of us benefit simultaneously.

Progressives will also need to stop seeing the world too strictly in pounds and pence terms. Dignity is often as important as money and while the two are intertwined there is not a straightforward correlation between them. Progressives are more comfortable analysing economic data or asking people what they *think* rather than how they *feel*, in part because the latter is much harder to devise policy prescriptions for. It leads them to miss why for some people having a high street they can be proud of is almost as important as the quality of the jobs on it, or why a universal basic income is no answer to the loss of dignity work provides. Progressives need to help people picture the pride and dignity their economic policies will deliver, not just the difference those policies will make to their wallets.

Second, progressives need to have a proactive account of where they stand on the big questions of history and

identity that *do* matter and be willing to debate and be challenged on these positions just as they would on any other. Just because much of the debate is about non-issues and takes place on terms entirely set by the government and its allies does not mean that progressives don't need to have an analysis and an offer about how we can all live together well. What institutions and rituals do they think it is important the whole country has in common? Do they accept that sometimes rights conflict and what is the fair way to balance them when they do? What bits of our country's past do progressives think everyone should take pride in that can represent a shared national story and not an 'alternative people's history' in which only radicals and reformers see themselves reflected? How, in other words, do they create a feeling of joint ownership over the country such as we saw reflected in the London Olympic opening ceremony?

Across the Atlantic, President Biden is showing what is possible. During the 2020 election candidate Biden did not shy away from making his views on issues like racial justice and LGBT inclusion known.[98] In office he is combining landmark progress on both with a transformative economic agenda.[99, 100] Crucially, he also refused to take Republican bait about concocted fights over whether publishers are 'cancelling' Dr Suess books and toy manufacturers are changing the gender of Mr Potato Head.[101]

Progressives neither can nor should dodge every question about identity, the task is to confront them with the intellectual confidence and easy delivery that comes from having really thought about where they stand. In a time where culture is being weaponised against them, they need to bin the scripts and start finding some stories that speak to our collective need for pride and belonging. They could do much worse than look to Robert Kennedy and Joe Biden for a place to start.

PILLAR TWO
Renew our democracy

One of the challenges when trying to engage in the 'democracy' field in the UK is that most of the civic organisations that talk about it are actually either electoral reform advocates or enthusiasts for more deliberative forms of participatory democracy like citizens' assemblies. Those may be perfectly sensible changes in their own terms, but for our purposes the big opportunity actually lies more in cultivating a 'democratic habit of mind' than it does in any procedural modernisation.

Such a habit of mind is one which elevates debate and negotiation to the level of first order values and relegates individual policy projects and partisan advantage to second order preferences. While a degree of polarisation is both necessary and healthy in a democracy, because of the role it plays in supplying voters with clear choices at election times, hyper polarisation ultimately undermines democracy because of the way it tends to make electoral losers sceptical of the neutrality of democratic institutions. One need only look at the way supporters of President Trump handled his defeat in November 2020 and again during the storming of the Capitol (and, to a lesser agree, at attacks from left and right on the BBC in this country[102]) to see how the pain of defeat is quickly displaced by the cry of betrayal.

When their most enthusiastic supporters tip over into hate speech, or use violent and dehumanising language about opponents, or indulge conspiracy theories about officials, journalists or judges who are simply doing their jobs,[103] politicians have a duty to cool things down rather than stir them up.

Their ability to do so depends, in many respects, on rather old-fashioned ideas of virtues – on politicians exercising

restraint even when the incentives (as we charted in Part One) all point to the culture wars being a useful political strategy.

Michael Ingatieff sees this as being about the ability to distinguish 'adversaries from enemies', noting that nothing in a democracy is a one-shot game, and someone who is an adversary today can be an ally tomorrow, but an enemy is someone with whom there is a mutual commitment to the other's destruction.[104] This, of course, is an active decision that politicians can make or not make. Choosing to treat political opponents as partners in the democratic process is, in our view, the surest sign someone is a true democrat and virtuous leader.

The New Statesman's Jeremy Cliffe argues in turn that this is just the manifestation of another virtue – that of patriotism, putting the benefit of the country as a whole before any personal advantage. He says: "To love one's country is not to hold a certain view on, say, the song Rule Britannia or the legacy of Winston Churchill, or to approve of this or that historical statue, but to uphold the integrity of its institutions, to make its politics and government clean and open, and to ensure all contribute their share to the social fabric. It is a struggle that does not demonise benefit claimants or migrants and instead takes aim at those who seek to buy influence, twist the rules to suit their ends, duck their responsibilities to society, divide it, and otherwise poison public life. It is a different sort of patriotism. One that is measured not in reverence for the past but in the condition of the norms and institutions passed onto future generations."[105]

Instead of this ability to take the long view, we see on left and right an irresponsible willingness to indulge conspiracist nonsense while media gatekeepers have failed, in the words of Conservative MP Neil O'Brien, to apply "some basic

hygiene about whose views they are promoting. Parts of Britain's media have spent the coronavirus pandemic doing everything they can to downplay the seriousness of it and set bogus stories running by publishing the claims of cranks".[106]

The answer here is probably in three parts. If we want to do more to develop democratic habits as an operating principle we need, firstly, more people with influence to behave as O'Brien himself has done and set their faces against those who poison the public square, even if they are ideological bedfellows. As Marie Le Conte has put it: "An even better system would be for journalists peddling dangerous and false information to be suffering professional consequences, but them getting publicly owned by an MP with a bit of time on his hands is better than nothing."[107] We need, in other words, to extract social penalties when people with power and a platform abuse it to spread misinformation or stir up division, even if the professional or political penalties are not yet forthcoming. Shame and social sanction are powerful tools and used both sparingly and proportionately are an indispensable part of rebuilding democratic norms.

Second, we need a much deeper commitment to civic education and local power-building. Some of that will be delivered through formal institutions (in particular schools, the student movement and trade unions) but much will come about through people volunteering and organising at a local level.

Underpinning that must be an operating principle that acknowledges, in researcher Chris Clarke's words, that the real opposite of populism is not centrism but *pluralism*: "Those who object both to left-wing and right-wing demagoguery don't share a unified set of ideals, equidistant from left and right. But they do share a view that a diversity of opinion and values is innate to democracy."[108]

The challenge to this pluralist vision (for which we are enthusiasts) is that ongoing exposure to people with different backgrounds and opinions is becoming much less common as people spend less time in the traditional places where community links were built across lines of difference – local pubs, libraries, tenants' associations, churches and local civic associations. Rebuilding that will take a specific focus on how our public services, planning laws and decisions of local authorities, local businesses and local charities can be aligned to build strong relationships and give everyone in an area both a stake and a say.

Finally, a strategy for defending democracy also requires a much more muscular approach to tech regulation, recognising that, in building business models based on monetising outrage and failing to stamp out online abuse, social media companies have fundamentally shifted the culture of our politics and enabled the rapid spread of misinformation and identity-based hate.[109] That has been allowed, in part, because the speed of development of the technology has far outpaced the understanding of lawmakers and major jurisdictions have yet to determine what we think the platforms are *for* and how, therefore, they should be taxed and regulated.[110] Even in advance of regulatory action, of course, we all have choices about our own behaviour on tech platforms, including around how much time we choose to spend on them.

It will not be enough, however, to simply promote a positive vision and cultivate democratic habits of mind if progressives are to succeed. For that they also need to pull back the curtain and name what they see.

PILLAR THREE
Name it when culture wars peddlers try to distract
or divide us

It is not an accident that one of the most powerful ads from the 2020 US election cycle starts with a simple question from Vice-Presidential candidate Kamala Harris: "Why are so many powerful people trying to make it so difficult for us to vote?".[111]

Sense-making is a key function of leadership. All of us want leaders (political, organisational, intellectual, moral and cultural) who can help make sense of the world we are in, explaining what is happening and why.

In the case of the successful Biden-Harris ticket, showing how voter suppression was key to the strategy of their opponents was a central plank of their own strategy. Being similarly explicit about what opponents are doing and whose interests their strategy serves should likewise be part of a progressive approach here in the UK.

'Pulling the curtain back' will mean naming it when bad faith actors try to divide and distract communities.

In Merge Left, Professor Ian Haney Lopez notes how culture wars peddlers have extended the range of the dog whistle in the US. Originally it was a coded nod that only supporters heard and understood ('welfare queens' = Black mothers). Today it is still coded (albeit sometimes barely) but now it is *meant* to be heard by all sides.[112]

Not only do they want their base to hear their dog whistle, they also want the other side to hear it and respond in a way that ideally both creates internal division and alienates wavering members of the public.

He notes in particular how culture wars peddlers *want* people to call them racist: "[by design] most people are hearing dog whistles as common sense. When we … say

that's not common sense, that's bigotry, that provides an opening for the dog whistle[r] to say 'hey, you're calling me a bigot, but I'm not a bigot, and in fact you're calling all my supporters bigots and they're not bigots' … 'I didn't say anything about race … you're stereotyping me … you're the real racist.' What matters is that the nation gets locked into a debate about who is the real racist, [because] when we're having that debate we're deepening the narrative that we're locked in a racial war and you need to decide which side you're on. You might think I'm just talking about how we appeal to white people. When we ran focus groups with African-American and Latinx communities we found these folks too did not like a framing that said the big problem in our society is white supremacy and that we've got a racist President. Activists love this message, we're super comfortable talking about white supremacy and structural racism. But most folks in African-American and Latinx communities are not comfortable with this language… it's too overwhelming, it's like 'I can't fight all of that'."[113]

Earlier, in Part Two, we looked at how this operates – about how the ultimate playbook of the culture wars peddlers is to distract, divide, demotivate and ultimately defeat progressives. This strategy was painfully on display in how the government set the terms of the debate about the Sewell report, where the entire conversation was drawn on to exactly the definitional questions Haney Lopez describes above.

It is important to remember this is not just a suspicion – it is confirmed repeatedly by government sources, including those who reported that Priti Patel's express intention in reforming the asylum system was "to send the left into meltdown"[114] and those who briefed the BBC that stoking controversy around the Sewell report was part of the plan,

because "the government knows how uncomfortable it is for Labour to have those debates".[115]

So the question for progressives is what they should do when they are pulled into debates that are skewed against their interests. We think there are broadly four questions progressives should ask themselves when deciding whether, when and how to engage with culture wars debates.

First, is the invitation to debate coming from an outright troll or hate actor? If so, the right course is not to engage, because any engagement is rewarded by social media algorithms.

Second, is there enough good faith shown by the curators of the discussion that it will be possible to shape the conversation, even if it is weighted from the outset? Historian David Olusoga argues the key lies in determining whether the debate has a foregone conclusion, saying: "There are lots of people I won't debate because there's no point, they want to engage in a pre-packaged culture war scenario … (so) I say no to 90 per cent of the things I'm asked to do because they are culture war traps."[116]

In other words, it is not simply that there's an opportunity cost for progressives to engage in bad faith debates, it is that they can actively harm their causes if they end up reinforcing frames of their opponents' choosing.

Third, it is important to be ready for debates progressives might not have initiated but may find themselves in against their will. The Lords debate about trans rights that we looked at in Part Three is a good example. Another will be questions put to politicians or organisational leaders during interviews that are about other questions entirely: it is one thing to refuse an invitation to go on talk radio or to walk away from a social media spat, it is another to stonewall questions if answering them is part of your job.

Here there are a number of different options. One is to do the work to identify personal 'buttons' which, if pushed, make it very difficult to think clearly and respond effectively in the moment. Knowing what they are allows bespoke training and practice so that the contours of the arguments and likely flashpoints are well understood in advance. Another is to identify 'lead' spokespeople and commentators on different issues who are the 'keepers of the frame' and to allow them to dominate broadcast on particular days until the debate is reframed in more neutral ways.

A final option is to get in first with 'prebuttal', proactively taking a collective and confident stance on questions around rights and justice to make it clear individual leaders and organisations represent a large and mainstream body of opinion. In this, progressives can take inspiration from the third sector, where other charities were publicly supportive when the Royal National Lifeboat Institution came under attack for using its expertise to prevent drowning abroad, when Unicef UK came under attack for working with UK children facing hunger here at home and when Barnardos came under attack for publishing a blog about white privilege. While it may be generally unwise for every organisation to enter every fight, if allies stand aside each time these non-rows get amplified by opportunistic politicians and click-bait journalism, the impression is left that the confected outrage is extremely widespread. That is not just highly distortionary in the debate, it also diminishes the effectiveness of entire sectors because it has a chilling effect on other leaders' readiness to advance controversial positions *and* leaves individual leaders feeling isolated and stressed.

In other words, side-stepping every battle every time will not actually be possible: there will be occasions where

the only way to illuminate the phoniness of a row is to acknowledge that it is taking place and that the 'side' which claims to be resisting 'an agenda' is in fact the only one *with* an agenda.

Fourth, progressives should ask themselves whether they are confident in naming not just *what* is going on with the culture wars but *why.*

The evidence from the Race-Class Narrative Project[117] (hosted by US think tank Demos) suggests that explicitly noting the role that racial scapegoating plays in maintaining the status quo by dividing working-class communities amongst one another is *more* effective with both white working-class and people of colour in the US than an economic message which does not mention race.[118]

We think there are two very sensible reasons progressives have been a little reticent in naming the strategies of the culture wars peddlers. The first is the worry about whether they have correctly identified what is going on. After all, not every debate about history or identity has culture wars characteristics and progressives *should* worry about calling foul incorrectly. It is perfectly possible to have discussions about institutions or traditions which are not divisive in motive or effect and it is both unfair and alienating to suggest that all deviations from progressive orthodoxy are inherently bad faith or harmful. So due care is required lest progressives end up casting themselves in a position of arbiter that nobody gave them and everyone resents them for.

The second reason politicians and activists alike have been nervous about talking about which vested interests are served by the culture wars is that they do not want to sow further doubt about politics itself. There is always a tension inside politics between those who feel the best form of defence is attack and those who worry that painting opponents as

liars and cheats merely serves to trash the brand of politics altogether. Happily, the Demos team have resolved this with extensive dial testing showing the most effective lines of all are those that call out *"certain* politicians".[119]

In other words, people need not worry that they are playing into the hands of cynics and conspiracists if they give an honest, measured, forensic account of what named individuals (whether politicians, commentators or campaigners) are doing that is exacerbating rather than diffusing divisions. In this we are pushing at an open door. Research from Kings College shows an overwhelming majority of people (77 per cent) think that the media often makes the country feel more divided than it really is. Even more importantly, 44 per cent of people think politicians invent or exaggerate culture wars as a political tactic. Only 10 per cent of people disagree with this idea and a swingable 35 per cent currently neither agree nor disagree.[120]

There will ultimately be a variety of ways to expose culture wars peddlers' strategy to the public, from just noting it and bridging on to another key message, to more detailed dissection as appropriate. Progressives shouldn't be afraid to use humour and satire too. For example, asking Mrs Merton style questions of ministers engaging in culture war tactics: "So Robert Jenrick, cabinet minister responsible for tackling our desperate lack of affordable homes and overseeing our homelessness crisis, what first attracted you to moving the debate on to the National Trust?".[121]

A common tactic of culture wars peddlers is to try to trigger people's pride by suggesting social justice movements hold big swathes of the public in contempt. In its most shameless form this involves a London-based politician or public commentator from a wealthy background telling sections

of the public that they have most to fear from 'liberal metropolitan elites' and 'dogooders'.

The British public, however, is not daft and progressives need to be more comfortable challenging culture wars peddlers on whether they think viewers were born yesterday and cannot spot them trying to move the debate from jobs to statues.

PILLAR FOUR
Build social movements that are inclusive in composition and culture

The ability to deliver the other three pillars of this strategy will depend on building social movements that are inclusive in both composition and culture, beginning with creating movements that are truly cross-class, multi-racial and intergenerational. Without that, progressive leaders simply will not clear the first hurdle, that of audiences believing "this person understands my life and cares about people like me".

Increased collaboration across sectors and 'fields' will allow progressives working on different issues to share intelligence about where debates might go next and evidence of what has and has not worked in defusing the culture wars in their areas, but it will not be possible without a radical increase in trust which in turn depends on a much greater focus on inclusion.

It is embarrassing to note, for example, that the private sector is often more diverse than those organisations whose mission it is to fight for social justice. Charity umbrella body ACEVO highlights that while ethnic minorities make up 14 per cent of the population and 11 per cent of private sector employees, the figure in the charity sector is just

9 per cent.[122] Similarly, while KPMG and the BBC (amongst others) collect and publish data on their class diversity,[123, 124] this remains a rarity amongst organisations campaigning for those on low incomes.

This often shows in how progressives speak. The young people at working-class youth campaigning charity RECLAIM highlight that the language often used about them is full of sociological jargon which is not just alien but alienating. While they rightly think of themselves as strong, proud and overlooked, many social justice organisations inadvertently use a language of weakness and shame, labelling people 'vulnerable', 'deprived' and 'hard to reach'.

Sunder Katwala at British Future has written about how some of the language in race debates similarly loses or confuses people. British Future's research in 2021 found that while 70 per cent of minority ethnic and 47 per cent of white people agree that 'it is easier to get ahead if you are white', these proportions fall to 59 per cent (minus 11 percentage points) and 29 per cent (minus 18 percentage points) when asked to agree if 'there is white privilege in Britain'.[125] Similarly, in the same report, they found only 43 per cent of minority ethnic people agreed that 'Britain is a systematically racist country', a drop of 27 percentage points versus those who think it is easier to get ahead if you're white. Many of those people answering the question appear to be lost to confusion on terminology, with around 30 per cent of each ethnic group including white choosing the 'neither agree or disagree' or 'don't know' options.

This shows one of the big risks of progressives revelling in using obscure language: it can be misunderstood by the very people it is designed to empower. Even worse, it can become a way for some well-off people to amass more cultural capital. As US conversative commentator David Brooks puts

it, the language used by people performatively allied to the progressive side can become "a way of showing the world that you are anti-elite, even though you work, study and live in circles that are extremely elite".[126]

Avoiding these power plays by radically diversifying our politics and our civic spaces is a simple matter of justice but changing the composition of who is in the room without a radically changed culture of how we relate to one another will not deliver a winning coalition. For that we need an inclusive culture that builds the power of people of every background and perspective, allowing everyone to contribute their time and their talents in a way that makes both them and the movement stronger.

In turn that requires leaders who have truly done the work to prepare for leading in a culture wars time. As Alex Evans, founder of Larger Us puts it: "All of us need to manage our mental and emotional states now more than ever. Not just for our own wellbeing, but also because our inner states end up affecting everything else around us. That's the whole point about collective psychology: the state of the world affects our states of mind, and our states of mind affect the world".[127]

Summary of Part Four

- It is not inevitable that we succumb to the culture wars, but ending them will take a concerted strategy, with four pillars.
- The first pillar is building a vision of the future which everyone can see themselves in, with a positive offer for the future of the economy and a confident account of history and identity.
- The second pillar is renewing our democracy by selecting and rewarding leaders who exercise restraint, value pluralism, defend institutions and norms and are willing to regulate technology.
- The third pillar is naming it when culture wars peddlers try to distract or divide us, pulling the curtain back so everyone can see that it is a cynical strategy.
- The final pillar is building social movements that are inclusive in composition and culture so that everyone, especially people who have been marginalised, has a stake in the future we build together.

We started with a question for every reader:

Am I here to win a culture war, or to end one?

We hope by now we have convinced you that all of us stand to gain when our common life is focused on the things we have in common and how we can work together to ensure everyone has an equal chance of living a life full of dignity, joy, love and hope.

This is not a utopian dream. It is possible to transform our economy and our society so that nobody is left out or left behind. Our neighbourhoods can be safe and beautiful and our workplaces creative and productive. Our relationships – with each other, with the state and with the environment – can bring us both security and happiness. And our partnerships with other countries can help maximise the benefits of globalisation while managing the downsides in all of our interests.

There are better days ahead but first we need to find a way through and out of the culture wars. Below we lay out some recommendations about where that work could start for different groups of people:

- **Political leaders** have the most important role to play here. In Part Four we laid out what a playbook could look like for a new politics of solidarity. We would encourage front benches to think about how it can be adapted for their own contexts and how they can pursue the historic mission of their parties without dividing our communities and undermining our democracy. In the end the only real brake on that kind of politics is conscience. We invite those who have been pushing for or executing a culture wars strategy to examine theirs. For those who oppose this kind of politics, doing so privately will not be enough. Political leaders will have to explain who is trying to drag us towards culture wars and why and show how they intend to deliver a fairer future for all of us instead. Wishing this problem away is not an option: only a politics of courage and conviction will see us safely to the end of a culture wars time.
- **Activists and campaigners** often have a proximity to and understanding of political power that gives us outsized influence in how our national debates unfold. With that opportunity comes the responsibility to model the kind of open, inclusive, decent world we say we are fighting for. If instead we splinter and choose to denounce one another for failing ever more stringent purity tests, the primary beneficiaries are those who oppose the progress we seek. And if we force leaders to choose between listening to us and listening to the wider public, we will never build the kind of mass support for change that true transformation depends on. Instead of working out how to 'perfect' our movements, we should be thinking about how to grow them and what will help them win. That in turn will require a real 'movement mindset', where

we are each less interested in individual credit than the strength and success of the movement as a whole.

- **Organisational leaders** often have a legitimacy and reach which are stronger than they know. People running charities, faith groups, social enterprises, creative platforms, businesses and research institutions can all choose to use their voice to either exacerbate or ameliorate our divisions. They can give interviews, make interventions in solidarity with those experiencing pile-ons and speak with their members and supporters about a different kind of future. They can become radically more inclusive, ensuring their organisational platform is available to those who traditionally go unheard, and create and curate opportunities for people to talk with and learn from people whose experiences and perspectives are different to their own.

- **Funders**, whether of political parties or civil society, can make a huge difference to whether the solidarity playbook is adopted. If political parties are to have policy platforms that actually deal with the underlying issues in our communities, they will need think tank and university partners to generate research, community groups and campaigning organisations to develop policy and practice ideas, and artists and organisers who can help people imagine and then build a future that works for them. Progressive philanthropists have much to learn from the conservative funders about coordination, strategic patience, embracing risk and taking an ecosystem approach that helps deliver paradigm shifts.

- **Voters**, which is to say all of us, have a role to play through what we reward with our time, money and attention. We can choose to keep showing there is a market for caricatures shouting past each other or we can stop engaging

with content that is designed to inflame rather than resolve debates. We can choose to vote and campaign for politicians trying to solve problems and read, watch and listen to the thinkers who are really wrestling with how to change things for the better for all of us. And we can all learn to disagree well, finding a way to make our case without dehumanising those coming from a different place.

For every group the key test is not what they are saying but what they are *doing*. Solidarity, after all, is something we do, not something we feel.

In 2020 we were inspired by two very different men who showed us what solidarity can deliver.

Marcus Rashford, a 23-year-old footballer, brought people together across communities and sectors to support children who would otherwise have gone hungry. Captain Sir Tom Moore, at 100 years old, united a nation in support for the National Health Service. Together they showed us how strong we can be when we work together on causes that really count.

Let us make this year one where we live up to their examples. Let us deny the culture wars peddlers the fight they want and go all out to win the change we need instead.

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Counter culture

How to resist the culture wars and build 21st century solidarity

Whether the arguments are over statues or footballers taking the knee, our political and media debate is increasingly dominated by talk of culture wars. For some on the right, an all-out assault on 'wokeness' is seen as an easy way to unite their base. How should progressives navigate their way through these wars?

In this pamphlet, Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding argue that we all have a role to play in denying the culture wars peddlers the fight they want. Instead of letting people distract or divide us, we should build a new solidarity strategy, with a positive offer for the future and a confident account of our history and identity. We all stand to gain when our common life is focused on the things we share and when we work together to ensure everyone has an equal chance of living a life full of dignity, joy, love and hope.