

'Cancel culture' doesn't stifle debate, but it does challenge the old order

Billy Bragg

Speech is only free when everyone has a voice – that's why young people are angry

Outside Broadcasting House in London, the BBC has erected a statue to one of its former employees, George Orwell. The author leans forward, hand on hip, as if to make a telling point. Carved into the wall beside him is a quote from the preface of *Animal Farm*: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

It's a snappy slogan that fits neatly into a tweet, but whenever I walk past this effigy of the English writer that I most admire, it makes me cringe. Surely the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* would understand that people don't want to hear that $2+2=5$?

For Orwell's quote is not a defence of liberty; it's a demand for licence, and has become a foundational slogan for those who wilfully misconstrue one for the other.

Over the past decade, the right to make inflammatory statements has become a hot button issue for the reactionary right, who have constructed tropes such as political correctness and virtue signalling to enable them to police the limits of social change while portraying themselves as victims of an organised assault on liberty itself.

The latest creation in their war against accountability is “cancel culture”, an ill-defined notion that takes in corporate moves to recognise structural racism, the toppling of statues, social media bullying, public shaming and other diverse attempts to challenge the status quo.

An open letter that is clearly decrying cancel culture (without naming it as such), signed by 150 academics and writers from all sides of the political spectrum, appeared this week in *Harper's Magazine*. The signatories complained of a censoriousness that was stifling debate and called for arguments to be settled by persuasion rather than action. Lip service was paid to the menace of Donald Trump, but the main thrust of their argument was a howl of anguish from a group that has suddenly found its views no longer treated with reverence.

Many of those who attached their names to the letter are longstanding cultural arbiters, who, in the past, would only have had to fear the disapproval of their peers. Social media has burst their bubble and they now find that anyone with a Twitter account can challenge their opinions. The letter was their demand for a safe space.

One of the signatories, the *New York Times* opinion columnist Bari Weiss, touched on the source of this malaise when she claimed recently that a “civil war” was going on across publications and companies across the US between those she described as “the (mostly young) wokes and the

(mostly 40+) liberals". Was it really a surprise to discover that some younger people might hold strong views that diverge with those of older generations?

Her revelation seems to be borne out in the most contentious issue in British politics – Brexit. Opinion is divided less on class or ideological lines, and more by age. Political conflict today is increasingly a battle between the young and the old.

Before the rise of social media, the anger of young people was restricted to pop music. Print and broadcast media kept youth corralled on the margins. We may have been angry about Thatcherism, but our ability to sway mainstream public opinion was limited. Today, a 22-year-old footballer with a Twitter account can force the government to make a U-turn in less than 48 hours. Darnella Frazier, whose smartphone footage of four Minneapolis police officers killing George Floyd provoked outrage around the world, is just 17 years old.

The ability of middle-aged gatekeepers to control the agenda has been usurped by a new generation of activists who can spread information through their own networks, allowing them to challenge narratives promoted by the status quo. The great progressive movements of the 21st century have sprung from these networks: Black Lives Matter; #MeToo; Extinction Rebellion. While they may seem disparate in their aims, what they have in common is a demand for accountability.

Although free speech remains the fundamental bedrock of a free society, for everyone to enjoy the benefits of freedom, liberty needs to be tempered by two further dimensions: equality and accountability. Without equality, those in power will use their freedom of expression to abuse and marginalise others. Without accountability, liberty can mutate into the most dangerous of all freedoms – impunity.

We look down on authoritarian societies because their leaders act without restraint, yet in Trump, we see a president who has never been held to account in his personal life or professional career, and his voters love him for it. Boris Johnson's supporters, when faced with examples of his lack of responsibility, shrug and say it's just "Boris being Boris". Impunity has become a sign of strength. You could see it in the face of the former police officer Derek Chauvin as he kept his knee on Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds.

In response to this trend, a new generation has risen that prioritises accountability over free speech. To those whose liberal ideals are proving no defence against the rising tide of duplicitous authoritarianism, this has come as a shock. But when reason, respect and responsibility are all under threat, accountability offers us a better foundation on which to build a cohesive society, one where everyone feels that their voice is heard.