

Let's not stay silent

Baroness Claire Fox argues that while most of us will never have our lives threatened for our views, Cancel Culture can make cowards of us all



Public service is always impressive, a building block of democracy. It requires giving of yourself for the public good. In wake of the horrific murder of David Amess, Conservative MP for Southend West, there is a certain poignancy that the vicious attack happened at his constituency surgery, one of those non-glamorous rituals of MPs' lives, where politicians – have faced demonstrable physical threats – too often we stay silent.

Many across society are vocally outraged in condemning this brutal, nihilistic killing. yet, recently, when public servants – perhaps frontline staff with less profile than elected politicians – have faced demonstrable physical threats – too often we stay silent.

Sir David was murdered on the anniversary of the unspeakable beheading of French school teacher Samuel Paty by an Islamist terrorist. I tried to raise an urgent question in the House of Lords about the implications of a teacher killed in the line of duty. My question was rejected: I was asked what urgent relevance it had for the UK Parliament. Lots, as it happens.

Within months, a teacher at Batley Grammar School was forced into hiding for fear of his life after an angry mob proclaimed that showing a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed, to illustrate a lesson on blasphemy, should be a sackable offence. Where was the outcry? Mainstream commentators were muted in making a fuss, perhaps fearful of accusations of Islamophobia.

I don't want to detract from specific

discussions that we need to have about Islamist extremism, an issue that needs to be confronted openly. Too many in public life shy away from such frank conversations, fearful they may be branded as anti-Muslim bigots.

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This fear of being labelled, and then cancelled, is becoming another threat to democracy. Cancel Culture has ratcheted up the free speech wars: if you say something that offends prevailing orthodoxies (as laid down by a self-appointed clerical of opinion formers), you will not just be no-platformed, but can face public shaming, complaints to your employer, career-ending reputational damage.

In the last fortnight, we have seen another type of public servant, academic philosopher, Professor Kathleen Stock, being driven from her workplace by threat of violence, having falsely been labelled transphobic by self-styled 'anti-TERF' activists.

Last weekend Prof Stock was due to speak on a panel discussing hate, heresy and the fight for free speech at the annual Battle of Ideas festival that I organise. Instead, she sent a statement, after advice from the police that it might not be safe for her to leave her home and appear in person.

Prof Stock's statement provided a graphic description of being on the receiving end of Cancel Culture: stickers all over her university building talking about the 'transphobic shit that comes out of Kathleen Stock's mouth', and posters that, as she explained, 'named me, defamed me and demanded I be fired'.

Prof Stock has now been advised to stay off campus and to fit security cameras outside her home.

I am reluctant to dignify the labelling of a nuanced gender-critical feminist as transphobic with any credibility. But those using the label boast that they have not read her book *Material Girls*. I have and it is tolerant, compassionate and erudite, with no hint of bigotry.

Most of us will never have our lives threatened for our views. However, Cancel Culture can make cowards of us all. A climate of fear means many are scared: if we support the wrong people, will we pay a heavy price and be cancelled too?

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Local authorities, often the embodiment of civic public service, should lead the way and cancel Cancel Culture, surely a fitting tribute to the values of open democracy that David Amess devoted his life to. ■

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soapbox



By Andrew Carter

In less than a week the Government is expected to publish its levelling up White Paper. For those of us who have been following the issue, we are hoping it proves to be the long-awaited blueprint for addressing the country's geographic economic inequalities.

These inequalities are stark: two in ten adults in Barrow-in-Furness have a degree, while six in ten in St Albans do; a worker in Milton Keynes produces in three days what someone in Blackburn produces in five.

The economic underperformance of many of our largest cities lies at the heart of these inequalities. Because Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow trail behind their international city peers, such as Rotterdam, Boston and Munich, the UK misses out on £83bn per year that could be invested in levelling up the whole country. The consequences of underperformance is not just felt in urban areas, but because most of our economic activity happens in cities, the problem requires city-focused solutions.

The White Paper needs a plan to invest in our city centres in a way that treats them as the hubs of the modern economy – the places where entrepreneurs, investors, workers and citizens come together to create the wealth and jobs that drive the national economy. Centre for Cities previously proposed a £5bn City Centre Productivity Fund to make them more attractive places for high-skilled workers and high-paying businesses to locate.

While this Government's enthusiasm for high-skilled research and development is welcome, it should spend R&D funding in a targeted manner, avoiding the temptation to 'jam spread' too thinly in a way that will have little impact. This means investing in places that have the assets, institutions and networks that can use the investment productively.

But not all policy interventions should be targeted at cities. Everywhere would benefit from increased spending on adult education, publicly-managed bus networks, ending local government austerity and further devolution. The Government cannot treat the White Paper's publication as 'job done'. It will take decades to bridge our country's geographic divides and, for many places, this will be the first step on a long road. ■

Andrew Carter is chief executive of Centre for Cities. Read all of its work on levelling up at <https://www.centreforcities.org/levelling-up/>

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