

UK: The culture war isn't harmless rhetoric, it's having a chilling effect on equality

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Attacks by the government and rightwing press are setting back the hard work of activist groups and charities in our communities

This month, two events defining opposite ends of the racial justice spectrum took place. In the first, in an interview with LBC, the home secretary, Priti Patel, roundly condemned last summer's Black Lives Matter protests as "[dreadful](#)". In the second, Black Lives Matter UK (BLMUK) announced it was [disbursing half of the funding](#) it had received since the protests started to grassroots groups across the country.

These events, less than a week apart, reveal the two spheres in which the fight for racial justice is taking place: there's the fictional one constructed by the media and politicians, and then there's the real world. In the Conservative press office and rightwing media, a culture war rages, featuring daily assaults on a cast of characters and organisations broadly associated with racial justice, migrant rights or attempts to reappraise Britain's account of its colonial history. Black Lives Matter continues to be a favourite target, months after its protests abated. The movement is constantly dragged into debates as a symbol of a divisive coalition of Marxists and vandals, set on disrupting the peace and setting back the cause of racial justice.

In reality, BLMUK is quietly getting on with the constructive work required to make change happen. The organisation, which aims to end police persecution and promote racial justice, will distribute £600,000 from funds it received in donations since last summer to a range of recipients whose work aims to "improve Black people's lives in a racist society". While we were told that BLMUK was concerned primarily with cultural sabotage, the group has been going about the difficult business of setting up the infrastructure to help families investigate the deaths of their loved ones in custody, domestic violence charities, and community groups that protect communities affected by cancer, long-term health conditions and Covid-19.

The funding is not only a rebuke to the rightwing narrative that seeks to define the group as disruptive, but also a sign that culture war attacks, sustained and widespread as they might be, have their limitations. They can only do so much to get in the way of individuals powered by a sense of moral purpose and supported by allies who, in small, unglamorous and low-profile ways, fund them into viability.

Resistance may be alive at grassroots level, but the attacks catch up eventually. We are already seeing a chilling effect on the work of charities and voluntary organisations which are legally required to be impartial. The head of a migrant rights charity recently told me that, when taking on new projects, he doesn't just weigh up whether he has the resources, but also whether it will expose his organisation to claims of political bias. Worse still, he worries for the safety of his staff following Patel's attacks on "[activist lawyers](#)".

This danger can be easily missed. The very nature of culture war debates is that they are often silly, have a short life cycle in the news, and are designed to maintain a politically useful mood rather than achieve a specific policy aim. Episodes in the culture war give weight to the view that it's fostered deliberately to distract from government failures – In January, as the number of deaths [began to increase](#) after the government's hasty lifting of restrictions the previous month, Robert Jenrick dedicated his energy to the high priority matter of [protecting statues](#).

Yet there is another front of the culture war, fought by people not only interested in distraction, but in results. Their aim is to shape the cultural and social climate so that it becomes inhospitable to causes at odds with their values; to determine who can participate in civic life, and who has a stake in Britain's future. These battles are taking place in our schools and universities and extend into legislation. The resources of the government are being deployed to define what constitutes [free speech in universities](#), dictate the [content of curriculums](#), and launch [official reviews](#) into the “progressive extremism” of movements such as BLMUK.

Navigating this increasingly hostile climate is Petros Elia, of [United Voices of the World](#), a trade union of precarious and migrant workers and one of the recipients of the BLMUK funds. When I spoke to him, his gratitude for the “transformative” donation was tempered by his account of the challenges his union faces in an environment where it is increasingly hard to raise funds due to legal hurdles, an antagonistic press and a “prevailing ideology” that is unsympathetic to the precariously employed.

BLMUK itself has, despite its successful fundraising, struggled to open bank accounts due to suspicion raised by its name, and had to scale back public appearances because of attacks in the rightwing press and government, opening it up to accusations of opacity. Kojo from BLMUK told me: “The funds received, though large, are a trickle compared with the flood of resources stacked against us.” They face a fight on two fronts: to support grassroots movements doing the real work to protect vulnerable racialised communities, and simultaneously to resist the vilification of these causes by elements of the media and the government.

But the dividends are worth fighting for. Supporting communities of colour would have benefits for the whole of society by making mainstream politics more open to redistribution and solidarity. Labour's strategy to rise above what is seen as the unseemly sandpit of culture squabbles may spare it some headaches in the short term, but salts the earth against it in the long term. By trivialising the culture war, the left risks overlooking its impact on the very individuals and groups who are its future.

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