Britain Must Defend Free Expression - Even When It's Uncomfortable

Adam Tugwell | 11 March 2026

One of the most difficult conversations in Britain today is not about any single community, but about the way cultural sensitivities, political incentives, and legislative overreach are beginning to reshape the foundations of our democracy.

The government's latest attempt to define and legislate a new standard for "Islamophobia" has triggered widespread concern - not because people wish to discriminate, but because the proposed framework risks criminalising legitimate criticism, debate, and scrutiny.

These are not fringe anxieties; they are the concerns of citizens who recognise that free expression is the bedrock of a free society.

For years, parts of the establishment have been gripped by the belief that offence itself is a form of harm that must be eradicated. This obsession with policing emotional discomfort - as if the state can or should guarantee that no one ever feels offended - helps no one. Least of all the people such rules are supposedly designed to protect.

When governments attempt to legislate feelings, they inevitably drift toward policing thought. That is not equality; it is conditioning.

The deeper issue is democratic, not cultural. **Laws in a free society must be universal.**

When legislation is crafted around specific identity groups rather than principles that apply to all citizens equally, it creates a hierarchy of rights. It sets a precedent that future governments can exploit for other groups, interests, or political gains. Once the law becomes a tool for managing identity rather than protecting liberty, the entire constitutional balance begins to tilt.

The term "Islamophobia" itself illustrates the problem. It is contested, imprecise, and often conflates hatred of individuals with criticism of ideas, doctrines, or political movements. As John Cleese has argued, the term can be used to make reasonable scepticism appear irrational or malicious. A society that cannot distinguish between criticism of ideas and hatred of people is a society that has lost its grip on free thought.

This is not a new pattern. **Progressivism, when stripped of practicality, has produced many casualties over the years.** The slow erosion of cultural confidence, national identity, and shared values has not happened by accident. Whether through distraction, incompetence, or ideological zeal, much of the political class has allowed - or even encouraged - the dismantling of the norms that once held the country together.

Increasingly, it appears that some politicians are willing to reshape the country not out of principle, but to secure reliable voting blocs. This is not leadership; it is self-preservation at the public's expense.

When political incentives reward identity-based policymaking, the result is legislation that prioritises electoral arithmetic over social cohesion.

The irony is stark. Those who have long championed equal rights now risk enabling systems of behaviour or belief that are fundamentally at odds with the rights they once fought for - particularly the rights of women and girls. A society cannot defend equality while simultaneously shielding any set of ideas from scrutiny.

The real danger is not cultural takeover; it is **institutional mismanagement that fuels polarisation**. When people feel they cannot speak openly, they do not become more tolerant - they become more resentful. Suppressing discussion does not prevent extremism;

it drives it underground. History shows that societies which restrict open debate always experience a rise in radicalisation, not a decline.

Many people already feel that the political system no longer serves them. They see laws being reshaped, language being policed, and public debate being narrowed. They sense that the rules are being rewritten without their consent.

In the absence of leaders who speak honestly and responsibly, people will inevitably turn to voices on the extremes. Today that may manifest as a protest vote. Tomorrow it may take forms that are far more destabilising.

Our political class has been creating this environment for decades. The difference now is that the consequences of their decisions are becoming impossible to ignore.

When politicians prioritise their own interests over the interests of the country, they erode trust, fuel division, and invite reactions they cannot control.

Britain does not need less debate - it needs more. It needs leaders who can hold two truths at once: that minority communities deserve protection from discrimination, and that free expression must remain non-negotiable. That cultural diversity can be respected, and national values can be defended. That equality means equal rights for all, not special protections for some.

The challenge before us is not to silence difficult conversations, but to have them openly, honestly, and without fear. A democracy that cannot tolerate scrutiny is not a democracy that can endure.

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