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## The British Conservative Party's drift to the right: Taking on the "deep state"

*La dérive droitière du Parti conservateur britannique : s'attaquer à l'« État profond »*

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# The British Conservative Party's drift to the right: Taking on the “deep state”

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## Introduction

I do not think we can seriously contemplate delaying article 50, because after two and a half years of procrastination, the public would accuse us in this place of deliberately setting out to frustrate their wishes. They would conclude that there was some plot by the deep state to kill Brexit, and that is precisely—[Interruption.] That is what many people would conclude, and that is precisely why we cannot now treat the public as idiots (Johnson, House of Commons, Hansard 2019a, col. 905).

Some people will say, as I leave office, that this is the end of Brexit. Listen to the deathly hush on the Opposition Benches! The Leader of the Opposition and the deep state will prevail in their plot to haul us back into alignment with the EU as a prelude to our eventual return (Johnson, House of Commons, Hansard, 2022, col. 732).

- 1 Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's suggestion that the “deep state” is at work in the United Kingdom (UK), thwarting the will of the people and their elected representatives, is a striking example of how leading members of the Conservative Party have come to embrace conspiracy theories more usually associated with the far-right. The notion of the “deep state” (*derin devlet*) originated in Turkey in the

mid-1990s (Gürpınar and Nefes 2020: 617). Although it was initially advanced by the political left, it was soon adopted by the authoritarian AKP (the Justice and Development Party: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi), its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and pro-government media to refer to a power bloc composed of businessmen, the military, state bureaucracy, NGOs, intellectuals and the cosmopolitan upper-middle classes who are purportedly conspiring against the elected government (Gurpınar and Nefes 2020: 618-619). It was an idea also taken up by the Trump administration in the United States where it served to demonise and delegitimise its critics (Michaels 2018). It has been framed as a very real threat to freedom. According to Gilbert T. Sewall, writing in *The Spectator*, "America's thought-manufacturers and mind-manipulators" in the liberal media, the military, the universities, the federal civil service, big industry and big-tech are seeking to create "a progressive monoculture" and redistribute "power, wealth and status at the expense of property holders and taxpayers" (2022). As illustrated here, the term "deep state" "seamlessly connects a plethora of seemingly unrelated groups and renders them parts of the same overarching power network" (Giry and Gürpınar 2020: 324).

- 2 For Boris Johnson, the "deep state" is collaborating with the Leader of the Opposition to reverse Brexit and thus "frustrate" the wishes of the people. Although he did not explicitly declare what groups might comprise the "deep state" in the House of Commons speeches cited above, he and other senior conservatives have suggested that there are forces acting against the popular will in the universities, the media, the criminal justice system, the Treasury and the civil service more generally. "They" do not just seek to bring Britain back into the European Union, but to undermine the very foundations of British society. The finger has been pointed at "left-wing troublemakers" who are "woke-washing" or "editing" history (Longhi 2021; Rees-Mogg 2020; Johnson 2020); at "the woke brigade" who are threatening free speech (Rees-Mogg, 2021); at left-wing protesters who are threatening public order (Braverman 2022a); at the civil service that engages in "wokeism that strays into antisemitism" (Truss, cited by Gutteridge, 2022). As Cammaerts has argued, the term "woke" has thus been "weaponized" by the Conservative Party: it has been "deturn[ed] from its initial meaning in the struggle for civil

rights into an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction" (2022: 735). Whether they are opponents of Brexit or Black Lives Matters protesters challenging conservative narratives of Empire and its legacy, "they" are presented as unpatriotic, which of course helps to frame them as enemies. These groups are seen to form part of a coherent whole who work together as part of a "deep state" to advance a "woke", progressive, liberal agenda that is deviant, extreme, intolerant, and even anti-democratic (Cammaerts 2022: 734-6). This "agenda" is presented as being wholly at odds with the basic common sense of ordinary people. It is used "as a kind of shorthand, allowing populists to contrive an omnipresent, omnipotent force that conspires against the interests of the people" (Giry and Gurpinar, 2020: 324). Senior conservatives embrace populist tropes, pitting themselves against the "deep state" and placing themselves firmly on the side of the "ordinary British people" they claim to represent. Indeed, populism is often defined as an appeal to "the people" against the "elites" (See, for example, Taggart 2000).

- 3 The idea of the "deep state" is a perfect conspiracy theory to the extent that it embraces "a simplistic dualism" common to all conspiracy theories whereby the ordinary people – the majority – are pitted against a shady minority working in secret to take power and harm them (Giry and Tika 2020: 114-15) by advancing a specific agenda, no matter how diverse and incoherent the elements of that agenda might be. The "deep state" is more specifically a *right-wing* conspiracy theory, framing the "enemies of the people" as left-wing out-of-touch elites who seek to overturn British values. Once a narrative put forward by the hard right, the Conservative Party has become particularly susceptible to it, even if the specific term "deep state" is not widely used (Ellis 2022). Some senior members of the Party, including former Home Secretary Suella Braverman (Braverman 2019), have also largely embraced the hard right idea that those who work to conspire against the British people are seeking to bring about revolution via "cultural Marxism". This term might be used in a neutral way to refer to the strain of Marxism pursued by left-wing scholars from the Institute for Social Research (the Frankfurt School) to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary

Cultural Studies which analysed the role of culture in the domination of the individual, thus shifting focus away from the purely economic analysis of earlier Marxists (Jamin 2014; Blackford 2015). However, it is commonly used today by the political right to suggest that it is the principal method via which the left seeks to achieve domination and pursue a totalitarian agenda. The American right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation, which boasts close links with senior conservative politicians such as former Home Secretary Priti Patel, believes that "cultural Marxism today presents a far more serious and existential threat to the United States than did Soviet communism" (Gonzalez and Gorka 2022). Other right-wing think tanks such as the Institute of Economic Affairs present intellectuals in the Frankfurt School and on the New Left in conspiracy theory terms, suggesting that they have been developing a decades-long project to bring about "a silent revolution" (Sidwell 2022). The notion of cultural Marxism began to be popularised in the 1990s by right-wing conservatives such as Pat Buchanan in the United States (Jamin 2014; Tutters 2018). They argued that since Marxists had failed to bring about revolution based on class struggle and violent conflict, they instead embarked on a project to bring about ideological hegemony based on identity politics (Gonzalez and Gorka 2022). In doing so, they claim that they have captured the institutions of the liberal states, in particular the universities, but also the courts and the civil service – to impose their leftist agenda, through totalitarian means, the most visible of which is the purported attack on free speech. Social justice movements are depicted as mere fronts to advance that agenda which entails "discredit[ing] institutions such as the nation, the homeland, traditional hierarchies, authority, family, Christianity, traditional morality in favour of the emergence of an ultra-egalitarian and multicultural, rootless and soulless global nation" (Jamin 2014: 86). Whilst this pejorative use of "cultural Marxism" was once the preserve of the extreme right, adopted by figures such as Anders Breivik in Norway and Nick Griffin in the UK (*ibid.*) it seems it has also now moved into the mainstream.

- 4 Current Home Secretary Suella Braverman used the term in 2019 at a meeting of the right-wing anti-EU think tank the Bruges Group, declaring "I do believe that we are in a fight against cultural Marxism. We have a culture evolving from the far-left which is about snuffing

out freedom of speech... It's absolutely damaging for our spirit as British people and British genius" (cited by Walker, 2019). Conservative MP, former minister and founder of the informal "Common Sense Group" of Tory MPs, Sir John Hayes, also used the term in the context of a House of Commons debate on Black History Month, decrying "the institutions" purportedly involved in advancing a "cultural Marxist agenda" which is "dogmatic, doctrinal" and "simplistic" (Hayes 2020). The narrative of cultural Marxism ignores the extent to which its chief protagonists – such as Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Antonio Gramsci –, together with those at the forefront of social justice movements in past and present, are critical of state power and concerned with individual freedom. It nevertheless provides a convenient and convincing account of how and why various movements challenging the status quo purportedly share a common agenda to take power. Whilst the term "cultural Marxism" remains marginal in government circles, many senior conservatives have publicly endorsed the notion of a threatening "woke", liberal agenda, thus acting as "political entrepreneurs in conspiracy theories" (Giry and Tika 2020: 111). This does not necessarily mean that they believe in them, but they do play a role in constructing and reinforcing them, allowing the Party to show clearly where it stands in the culture wars, especially at a time when it is struggling to appeal to voters on economic issues (Sleigh 2023). The culture wars can be understood as a political technique used to manufacture popular consent (Featherstone 2022). Right-wing populists tend to use culture wars as a means of pitting 'the people' against a dangerous minority who threaten to undermine basic common sense, thus securing support for authoritarian policies.

- 5 This paper seeks to analyse how the Conservative Party uses discourse and policy to discredit the key actors in the "deep state" conspiracy. It is based on a corpus of political speeches made by conservative MPs between 2019 and 2023 both inside and outside Parliament. 2019 is considered as a good starting point as this is when Boris Johnson became Prime Minister and conspiracy theories started to become normalised amongst conservative MPs on the right of the party. The chapter also examines reports from right-wing think tanks which advance conspiracy theories. Think tanks such as the US-based Heritage Foundation and the UK-based Institute of

Economic Affairs and Policy Exchange have long had close links to the Conservative Party and often help to inform the direction of policy (James 1993; Dixon 2008; Ramsay and Geoghegan 2018; Garnett and Lorenzoni 2020). It is argued that they have contributed to constructing a discourse on conspiracy within the contemporary Conservative Party. The chapter begins by focussing on right-wing discourse on universities, the institutions identified as being central to the advance of cultural Marxism and thus a left-wing agenda. It then moves on to discussing discourse on institutions such as the BBC, the judiciary and the police. The aim is not just to bring to light the use of the language of conspiracy theorists among conservative MPs but also to demonstrate that these theories are indeed spurious and debunk them.

## 1. "We All Live on Campus Now": The universities and the "deep state"

- 6 The idea that "we all live on campus now" has been employed in policy papers by Policy Exchange (Kaufmann 2022) and the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) (Sidwell 2022), right-wing think tanks close to the British Conservative Party. It was originally coined by conservative journalist and blogger Andrew Sullivan in the *New York Magazine* who asserted: "The goal of our culture now is not the emancipation of the individual from the group, but the permanent definition of the individual by the group. We used to call this bigotry. Now we call it being woke. You see: We are all on campus now" (2018). Marc Sidwell, in a policy paper for the IEA, argues that cultural Marxists deliberately orchestrated an attack on free speech on campus with the ultimate aim of curtailing free speech beyond the university and controlling behaviour throughout wider society (Sidwell 2022: 20-21).
- 7 Given that universities are seen as being at the forefront of a drive to spread an illiberal left-wing agenda, much attention has been concentrated on the issue of free speech. Madsen Pirie, president and co-founder of the neoliberal think tank the Adam Smith Institute has claimed that "Many universities devote attention to social

engineering and politically correct stances rather than to attracting and educating the best students. Many do not allow effective free speech on campus lest a minority of students might feel 'offended'" (Madsen Pirie 2022: 3). To support these claims, universities have been accused of "no platforming" and of fostering a broader "cancel culture" that it is said to give rise to. The notion of "cancel culture" can be understood as an attempt to silence those we disagree with. For Boris Johnson, it is an agenda advanced by "the woke" who purportedly wish "to rewrite our national story" and thus pose a threat to "our history and cultural inheritance" (Johnson 2021).

- 8 The policy of "no platforming" was officially adopted in 1974 by the National Union of Students (NUS), the confederation of affiliated students' unions in the UK, in an effort to resist the rise of the fascist National Front (Smith 2020: 4). The policy entailed withholding student union funds from fascist and racist organisations and speakers, protesting to exclude certain speakers from campus, or disrupting events where unwelcome speakers might appear (*ibid.*: 3). Since the 1980s, the policy has been used against sexists and homophobes and, more recently, against gender-critical feminists such as Germaine Greer and Julie Bindel who have been accused of transphobia (*ibid.*). It is often suggested that the practice has become so widespread that UK universities are faced with a "crisis" of free speech, as "campus censorship has reached epidemic levels" (Slater 2016: 2).
- 9 Those who engage in "no platforming" are described as "fundamentalists" of "the campus though police" (*ibid.*). There is a certain paradox here as students are accused of being both authoritarian and overly-sensitive, incapable of listening to views that might offend them: "students are at the same time both fragile, risk averse 'snowflakes' and heavy-handed McCarthy-like warriors. Students are to be both pitied and feared" (Smith 2020: 3). The suggestion is that the practice is an entirely new phenomenon, yet its history can be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s (*ibid.*). Indeed, long before the NUS officially adopted its "no platforming" resolution, well-known figures such as Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists, Conservative MP Enoch Powell, and the controversial historian Samuel Huntington, were prevented from speaking at British universities (*ibid.*). Indeed, it was largely in

response to it being applied against Conservative MPs such as Home Secretary Leon Brittan, who was met by a large crowd of protesters when visiting the University of Manchester in 1985, that the Thatcher government introduced the Education (n°2) Act in 1986 (*ibid.*: 6-7). Section 43 of that Act places a legal duty on British universities to "take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees... and for visiting speakers".

- 10 Nonetheless, it is only recently that "no platforming" has received such widespread media and political attention, leading to an inquiry by the Human Rights Joint Select Committee into the freedom of speech in universities (Human Rights Joint Select Committee 2018). Focusing on the specific policy of "no platforming", the report concluded that "a large amount of evidence suggests that the narrative that 'censorious students' have created a 'free speech crisis' in universities has been exaggerated" (*ibid.*: col. 35). It based its findings on the collection of written and oral evidence from students, student society and student union representatives, vice-chancellors and university administration staff which demonstrated that a very small proportion of external speaker requests were rejected, and that when they were, this was largely for administrative rather than political reasons (*ibid.*: col.34). The report was particularly critical of the on-line magazine *Spiked's* Free Speech University Rankings project, which ran from 2015 to 2019 and ranked universities according to the degree to which it believed they respected free speech. The Committee found that universities with a poor *Spiked* ranking might simply be complying with the law rather than being forced to limit free speech by over-zealous students (*ibid.*: col.32).
- 11 Universities' duty to protect free speech affirmed in the 1986 Act must be balanced with the Equality Act 2010 which outlaws speech considered discriminatory. That duty must also be balanced with universities' duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to "have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism". This means that they must ensure that speakers do not express "extremist" views that might have such an effect. According to Malcolm, the definition of extremism provided in the Act is broadly-drawn and ambiguous and "could be interpreted so as to encompass many views and ideas not usually concerned with

drawing people into terrorism" (Malcolm 2021: 525). Furthermore, it may lead to students becoming fearful of expressing their views or inviting others to do so for fear of being labelled as "extremist". The Joint Select Committee on Human Rights highlighted this problem and called for an independent review of the Prevent duty to "include consideration of its impact on free speech and association in universities" (Human Rights Joint Select Committee 2018: col. 70-78). It has therefore been suggested that the biggest risk to free speech in universities comes not from "no platforming" – the instances of which have been "negligible" and "justified" to the extent that they have aimed to prevent speech that may be in contravention of the Equality Act – but from self-censorship on the part of students worrying about associating themselves with views deemed controversial (Malcolm, 2021: 532-534). For example, Muslim students have been found to self-censor for fear of being associated with extremist positions (*ibid.*). The government's own "Prevent" duty is considered to have such an effect (*ibid.*).

- 12 Nonetheless, the current Conservative government has identified the key threat to freedom of speech as resulting from "no platforming" within universities. Senior conservative MPs have described the practice as "modern McCarthyism" (Davis 2021: col.61) aimed at securing the "censorship of speakers who do not fit left-wing woke narratives" (Longhi 2021). Although the problem is seen as originating on campus, it is considered to constitute a threat to society as a whole. As one Conservative MP claimed:

The campus is merely a staging ground for wider civilisation and society. Those who wish to do away with freedom of speech are attempting to dismantle the foundations of our society and to supplant them with their own totalitarian doctrine. By removing freedom of speech, dissenting voices can be silenced and submission ensured. For proof of that we need only look at recent attempts to subject British history to a radical revision and the accompanying attempts to taint our greatest heroes. This is a deliberate and concerted attempt to erode the pillars of our nation so that we are left with nothing to believe in. Once that point is reached, those responsible—the anarcho-Marxist, hard-left agitators—will be able to impose their own, ever-changing standards whereby yesterday's truth is tomorrow's crime. (Bacon, 2021: col.74).

- 13 The universities are presented here as the principal actors leading a "deep state" conspiracy to overthrow British society and against popular interests. It was therefore deemed necessary to resist this "cancel culture" and its "dystopian, Orwellian indoctrination" via new legislation (*ibid.*). The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 introduces a Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom to ensure that free speech duties are respected on campus and to impose penalties if those duties are found to have been breached. There is a danger that this may be counterproductive as increased state control may lead to further self-censorship. As the campaign groups *Index on Censorship*, *English PEN* and *Article 19* pointed out in a letter to the former Secretary of State for Education, "additional legislation, including the imposition of a 'Freedom of Speech Champion', may have the inverse effect of further limiting what is deemed 'acceptable' speech on campus and introducing a chilling effect both on the content of what is taught and the scope of academic research exploration" (2021). Given that the threat to free speech on campus and beyond is widely thought to be exaggerated, the government's desire to push ahead with the law appears to be motivated by a populist strategy to place itself firmly on the side of ordinary people against the "scholarly elites" (Jones 2022: 183).

## 2. The BBC: "Systemically woke" 1?

- 14 The BBC has also been singled out for criticism as a partner in the "deep state" conspiracy, promoting a culturally liberal agenda against the interests of the mass of ordinary British people. A recent report by History Reclaimed, a group of academics seeking "to challenge distortions of history", has argued that a certain number of BBC documentaries dealing with issues such as slavery, race, empire, and war "give a voice only to one side of a disputed past" and "favour extreme and provocative claims" that "seem calculated to create prejudice and ill feeling against this country" (History Reclaimed 2022: 20-21). Similarly, a report by the Campaign for Common Sense, a group founded by Mark Lehain, once a Conservative candidate and adviser to a former Conservative education secretary, found a lack of balance in BBC drama output, claiming that "a discernible left-wing bias can be detected, with distinctly anti-Conservative and anti-institution sentiments appearing frequently in its programming"

(2022). These reports were widely picked up by the right-wing press. *The Daily Mail* claimed that the BBC is "warping modern Britain" by allowing "woke viewpoints" (Lockhart 2022) whilst *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the BBC is "going for woke in rewriting British history" (Rayner 2022). They serve to reinforce widespread accusations of BBC "liberal bias" or "wokery" that have even been endorsed by former BBC reporters and broadcasters such as Robin Aitken (2018), John Humphries (Townsend 2019) and Nigel Rees (2022).

- 15 There is nothing new in these reports about left-wing BBC bias, which can be traced back to the earliest days of broadcasting (Mills 2016), but today they help feed into contemporary conspiracy theories about elite networks operating to undermine the commonsense views of ordinary British people. They have been fully endorsed by Conservative ministers. Indeed, in August 2020, 14 Conservative MPs, including Lee Anderson, the recently-appointed Deputy Chair of the Conservative Party, wrote to the new Director-General of the BBC, Tim Davie, complaining that "the BBC is fundamentally failing ... to ensure that the diverse perspectives and interests of the public and audiences, including licence fee payers across the whole of the United Kingdom, are taken into account" (Eida 2020). The letter was written in the wake of the false controversy over the BBC's alleged refusal to play the patriotic anthems "Rule Britannia" and "Land of Hope and Glory" at the annual classical musical festival "Last Night of the Proms". Even though it transpired that the BBC had in fact planned to play the songs but without any singing, this incident was taken as further evidence that the BBC was pursuing a "woke agenda" against the better judgement of the British people (Davies 2020). Boris Johnson, then Prime Minister, reacted to the furor by stating, "I think it's time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions and about our culture, and we stopped this general bout of self-recrimination and wetness" (cited by Shariatmadari, 2020). In a similar vein, the BBC has been accused of being somewhat unpatriotic in failing to represent a positive vision of post-Brexit Britain. In 2017, 72 MPs led by Conservative MP Julian Knight, now chair of the government's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that monitors the BBC, accused the institution of bias in

its reporting of Brexit, claiming that its "pre-referendum pessimism" meant that it was "unfairly representing" Leave voters (BBC 2017).

- 16 In reality, there is scant evidence that the BBC is pursuing a "woke agenda". A report by researchers at the University of Cardiff analysing the breadth of opinion represented by the BBC over a 5-year period found that while the ruling party always has a larger share of the voice, Conservative dominance tended to be greater than Labour's voice when it was in power (Wahl-Jorgensen *et al.* 2013). It also showed that the broadcaster's coverage of the UK's relationship to the EU was more likely to be framed as a problem than not, hardly a stereotypically "woke" position. Furthermore, the BBC's own review of the impartiality of its coverage in the fields of taxation, public spending, public borrowing and debt found that where bias could be found, it tended to lean both left and right, showing that "a charge of systematic political bias... is hard to sustain" (Blastland and Dilnot 2022: 3). Another study investigated the extent to which the BBC's impartiality might be threatened by its reliance on think-tanks (Lewis and Cushion 2017). It concluded that the majority of think-tanks referred to in its news coverage are centrist and non-partisan, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies, demonstrating the organisation's commitment to impartiality. Yet, in 2015, in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum, current affairs programming showed a slight bias towards right-leaning over left-leaning thinktanks (*ibid.*: 14). Yet another recent study into BBC journalists' following of and interactions with MPs on Twitter found an orientation towards high-profile MPs from the right of the political spectrum (Mills, Mullan and Fooks 2020).
- 17 It has been suggested that while the BBC does not consciously pursue any particular political agenda, its output tends to be biased towards networks of power, notably on account of the porous nature of the boundaries between the worlds of politics and the media (Mills 2016). Impartiality might also be affected by the fact that journalists often find themselves reporting on issues of which they have little knowledge or understanding. Economics reporting is a case in point. The BBC impartiality review cited above noted the tendency of journalists to make false and misleading analogies between government and household debt, enabling debt to be presented in simplistic terms as automatically "bad" (Blastland and Dilnot 2022: 14).

This kind of reporting surely helped to legitimate government discourse about the need for austerity, despite that fact that many economists believed that the policy was damaging (Krugman 2015). Even the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), the UK's official independent economic forecaster, suggested that austerity policies had harmed economic growth in an open letter sent to former Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013 (Inman 2013). Recently, former Prime Minister Liz Truss added the OBR to the list of organisations purportedly conspiring against the government, forming part of the "wider orthodox economic system" of which the UK Treasury and the IMF are also thought to form a part (Truss 2023).

- 18 Regardless of the evidence, the notion that the BBC is biased against the government has led to ministers seeking to undermine the organisation by threatening to cut funding and abolish the licence fee. Former Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself boycotted BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme for a period of two years and encouraged other cabinet ministers to follow suit. Johnson instead appeared on *Times Radio*, a new broadcaster launched in 2020 by the Murdoch press as a direct rival to Radio 4 (Davies 2020). Senior Conservative MPs, such as Jacob Rees-Mogg have also been happy to appear on GB News, the new TV channel launched in 2021 whose chairman described as "anti-woke" due to the political stance of its key presenters and feature segments such as "wokewatch" (Neil 2021). The position taken by senior conservative figures against the BBC has surely helped fuel the anti-BBC sentiment which has coalesced around the "Defund the BBC" campaign, a new lobby group established in 2020 against the BBC licence fee. The individuals behind the campaign are particularly critical of what they perceive as the BBC's lack of impartiality, notably surrounding Brexit (Anglesey 2020). It should therefore come as no surprise that its actions have been widely reported by the right-wing press such as the *Daily Mail* (Carlin 2021). Interestingly, "Defund the BBC" frames its arguments against the BBC in terms of the defence of the poor who are often unfairly criminalised for failure to pay the licence fee (Anglesey 2020). This chimes with the former culture secretary, Nadine Dorries' justification for reducing the cost of the licence fee to protect families from "the threat of bailiffs knocking on their door", particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis (Dorries 2022:

col. 39). This is another illustration of the government framing its attempt to silence those who it perceives as its detractors in populist terms as enemies of the people.

### 3. The legal system: "Rooting out the leftist culture"

19 A number of senior Conservatives have suggested that key actors in the criminal justice system are also part of the deep-state conspiracy to advance a leftist agenda. Boris Johnson, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2019, promised to "root out the leftist culture of so much of the criminal justice establishment" (2019b). Former Home Secretary Priti Patel lashed out against the "leftie lawyers" who defend a "broken asylum system" (2020), an idea that was picked up on by Johnson himself when he criticised "left human rights lawyers" in his own speech to the Conservative Party conference (2020). Current Home Secretary Suella Braverman endorsed the claim made by Chief Constable Stephen Watson from Greater Manchester Police that policing has become too "woke", advocating a return to "common sense policing" (Braverman 2022b). Judges have also come under fire. The most blatant example was the reaction to the High Court's 2016 ruling that article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty to set in motion Britain's exit from the EU could only be triggered by Parliament, not the executive alone. Most famously, the *Daily Mail* carried the headline "Enemies of the People", claiming that the High Court judges were seeking to overturn democracy and thwart the will of those who had voted in favour of Brexit (Slack 2016). When the decision was upheld by the Supreme Court in January 2017, Dominic Raab, currently Deputy Prime Minister, echoed this idea, warning that an "unholy alliance of diehard Remain campaigners [and]... an unelected judiciary" had "thwart[ed] the wishes of the British public" (cited by The Secret Barrister, 2020). The claim was reiterated in 2019 when the Supreme Court ruled that the Prime Minister's decision to prorogue Parliament for five weeks was unlawful: speaking shortly after the ruling, Johnson declared, "Let's be in no doubt, there are a lot of people who want to frustrate Brexit" (cited by Woodcock, 2019). These are not isolated incidents: direct criticism of judges by conservative ministers have become something of a trend, with

judges being described variously as "wet", "liberal", "interfering" and "left-wing" (APPG 2022: 16-26).

- 20 Government criticism of criminal justice professionals has been widely echoed by the right-wing press and think tanks, as suggested above by the case of the *Daily Mail*. The Adam Smith Institute has criticised the police for "pursu[ing] 'hate speech' rather than burglaries" (Madsen Pirie 2022: 3) and asserted that the English judiciary and English law enforcement have restricted free speech to such an extent that "British speech code is designed to protect the heckler, not the speaker... the offended, not those who would cause offence" (Byrne 2020: 3-4). Policy Exchange has questioned the political impartiality of the police, expressing concern about their handling of political protest and their adoption of gestures of solidarity, such as the wearing of a badge on their uniform, or "taking the knee" (Spencer 2022: 18-21). The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* have carried a number of stories on "woke" police. For example, the former carried a story on a police officer who wore a rainbow-coloured helmet, asking the question, "Is this Britain's wokest cop?" (Levy 2022), whilst the latter printed an article penned by Iain Duncan Smith, former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, in which he called for an end to "ridiculous 'woke' policing" (Duncan Smith, 2022). In the *Daily Mail*, controversial columnist Leo McKinstry has derided human rights lawyers and campaigners as "ideologues" and "parasites" who are failing to respect democracy and carrying out a "relentless assault on the Government" in their pursuit of a "fashionable woke agenda" that clashes with the desire of British people to have tougher immigration controls (McKinstry 2022). "Left-wingers" are seen to be not just challenging immigration law but posing a threat to society itself: "The acid of their self-righteousness is corroding our civilization" (*ibid.*).
- 21 These attacks on criminal justice professionals are not just rhetorical, but have concrete effects. According to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution, in recent years the judiciary has been "accused, by both politicians and the media, of 'interfering in politics'", despite the lack of evidence supporting this claim (APPG 2022). It concluded:

the behaviour of the executive towards the judiciary may be considered constitutionally problematic. Although we have only seen evidence of one direct attempt by a minister to influence a particular judicial decision, ministers have generally acted in a manner that may be considered improper or unhelpful given their constitutional role. This includes making public statements which misrepresent judicial decisions, launching ad-hominem attacks on judges who decide against them, responding to adverse decisions with threats to "reform" the judiciary (including to bring it under political control), and conflating "decisions with political consequences" with "political decisions", thereby giving the misleading impression that judges are stepping outside their constitutional bounds. This behaviour can, in extremis, be constitutionally improper because it erodes public confidence in the judiciary and implies that ministers are better able to decide on matters of law than judges (*ibid.*: 7-8).

- 22 The Conservatives have been particularly critical of the procedure of judicial review which enables members of the public to hold government to account by examining the legality of an administrative action by a public body. The procedure was notably used to challenge the legality of the executive's attempt to trigger article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty without consulting Parliament, the prorogation of Parliament in 2019, and government plans to send migrants to Rwanda. In its 2019 manifesto, the Party promised to ensure that judicial review "is not abused to conduct politics by another means or to create needless delays" and thus facilitate "effective government" (Conservative Party 2019: 48). The Judicial Review and Courts Act 2022 subsequently limited the use of judicial review regarding immigration cases, yet some Conservative ministers have reportedly claimed that it does not go far enough and are seeking to place further limitations on the procedure (Siddique 2022).
- 23 It has been argued that government attempts to curb the power of the judiciary, together with reforms to clamp down on protest, have led to "democratic crisis" whereby it is becoming increasingly difficult for the public to scrutinise and challenge the government (Liberty 2021). Indeed, there is some concern that repeated criticism of, and at times outright attack on, the judiciary has led to it becoming somewhat more deferential towards the executive (APPG 2022: 38-40), which of course risks undermining its independence

and capacity to check the power of public officials. Yet, the government has presented its reform of judicial review as a means of upholding the sovereignty of Parliament against "the unelected branches of the state" (Buckland 2021). The government thus holds itself up as the only legitimate defender of the public interest, thus conflating the will of the executive with the will of the people.

## Conclusion

- 24 The British Conservative Party's trenchant criticisms of key institutions such as the universities, the BBC, the police and the judiciary serve to support former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's assertion that there is a "deep state" working against the interests of the elected government and therefore seeking to undermine the democratic "will of the people" (Johnson 2019). Although the term "deep state" is not commonly used within the Party, many senior figures within it, together with the right-wing press and think tanks, have suggested that there are a plethora of different groups working together to push a left-wing "woke" agenda that might be defined as anti-Brexit, pro-immigration and diversity and unpatriotic. In order to further that agenda, they are prepared to use authoritarian means, such as clamping down on free speech, infiltrating the nation's national broadcaster and politicising the law. This account might be considered as a conspiracy theory to the extent that it relies on gross exaggeration of what the evidence suggests are in fact relatively minor problems (Giry and Tika 2020: 109); on a simplistic division of the world "into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot" (Butter and Knight 2020: 1); and on the drawing together of apparently diverse issues into a seamless narrative (Giry and Gürpınar 2020: 324).
- 25 Why has the Conservative Party resorted to this populist strategy that is more commonly associated with the extreme right? According to openly right-wing academic Eric Kaufmann of *Policy Exchange*, the vast majority of British people oppose a "cultural leftist position" which he describes as "the belief that minorities must be protected from psychological harm arising from forms of dominant culture, and that a radical transformation of science, institutions, narratives and culture can redistribute power from dominant to subaltern groups"

(Kaufmann 2022: 8). He thus argues that appealing to cultural issues can be a useful electoral strategy, serving to unite the right and the centre-ground whilst fomenting divisions on the left (*ibid.*: 56). It would appear that this is a widely-shared view within the Conservative Party. Indeed, Iain Anderson, a leading Conservative business leader, who recently renounced his Party membership to join Labour explained his decision by his belief that the Conservatives are planning "to run a culture war to distract from fundamental economic failings" in the run-up to the 2024 general election (Parker 2023). In doing so, they are not just responding to public opinion, but helping to frame how voters understand key issues (Sobolewska and Ford 2020: 326).

- 26 This is, however, a risky strategy. Firstly, because the adoption of radical right discourse might increase support for rival right-wing parties as that discourse becomes normalised and legitimised (*ibid.*: 329). Secondly, because the conclusion that the majority of British people are anti-woke might be erroneous. Using data from the British Election Study, Jennings has concluded that "British society overall is headed in a more liberal direction" on cultural issues (2023). Finally, the importance of economic issues to the electorate should not be underestimated: at the time of writing (March 2023), the economy is at the forefront of people's concerns (Statista 2023), and they are increasingly likely to support left-wing economic ideas such as redistribution (Jennings 2023). If the Conservative Party is seen to be failing to tackle "bread and butter" issues, it may ultimately find itself depicted as "the enemy of the people".

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1 The term is taken from Nigel Rees, former BBC broadcaster (Rees 2022).

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## English

The British Conservative Party has increasingly embraced a right-wing conspiracy theory according to which a host of unrelated actors are said to be working against the best interests of ordinary British people to advance a "woke" agenda that is left-wing, anti-Brexit, pro-immigration and unpatriotic. Some conservatives, namely former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, have even gone so far as to suggest that these forces form part of a "deep state", working in the shadows against the elected government and therefore against the people themselves. They purportedly do so by advancing "cultural Marxism" – pushing a silent revolution through, rather than against, the key institutions of the British State. Through an analysis of political speeches and of reports from right-wing think tanks close to the Conservative Party, this article seeks to analyse the British government's recent attacks on those who it has designated as the principal enemies of the people: the universities, the BBC, the police and the judiciary. These attacks are not just rhetorical but have concrete effects on the ground which may seriously undermine their independence. Whilst there is scant evidence for the apparent left-wing bias of these institutions, painting them as "woke" serves primarily as a useful populist political strategy, placing the Conservative Party firmly on the side of "the people" in the context of the culture wars" and serving as a distraction from serious economic problems.

## Français

Le Parti conservateur britannique adhère de plus en plus à une théorie du complot de droite selon laquelle une multitude d'acteurs sans lien apparent entre eux travailleraient contre les meilleurs intérêts des Britanniques pour faire avancer un programme « woke » qui serait anti-Brexit, pro-immigration et antipatriotique. Certains conservateurs, notamment l'ancien Premier ministre Boris Johnson, sont même allés jusqu'à suggérer que ces forces font partie d'un « État profond », agissant dans l'ombre contre le gouvernement élu et donc contre le peuple lui-même. Elles le feraient en promouvant le « marxisme culturel » menant ainsi une révolution silencieuse à travers, plutôt que contre, les institutions clés de l'État britannique. Cet article vise à analyser les récentes attaques du gouvernement britannique contre ceux qu'il a désignés comme les

principaux ennemis du peuple : les universités, la BBC, la police et les juges. Ces attaques ne sont pas seulement rhétoriques mais ont des effets concrets sur le terrain qui peuvent sérieusement compromettre leur indépendance. Alors qu'il n'existe que peu de preuves du biais de gauche de ces institutions, le fait de les dépeindre comme « woke » constitue avant tout une stratégie politique populiste utile, plaçant fermement le Parti conservateur du côté du « peuple » dans le contexte des « guerres culturelles » et servant à détourner l'attention des graves problèmes économiques.

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### **Mots-clés**

conspiration, Parti conservateur britannique, populisme, État profond, marxisme culturel, woke, analyse de discours

### **Keywords**

conspiracy, Conservative Party, populism, deep state, cultural Marxism, woke, discourse analysis

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