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How anti-trans media undermines human rights and equality for everyone

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Executive summary

A moral panic about trans people has been raging in the UK press, amplified by social media. While it started ramping up in 2017, the political hostility to trans people goes back decades. Anti-trans media stories have served as a political tool to attack European equality and human rights frameworks for many years. Failing to take media transphobia seriously endangers everybody's civil rights.

Many of the rights and protections that LGBTQ people have in the UK resulted from EU law and judgments by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). This research examines the stories that the British press told about 'Europe' and LGBTQ rights between 1973 and 2017. It also includes some illustrative examples from the 2020s. The report's findings are based on analysis of four widely-read newspapers: *The Guardian; The Telegraph; The Daily Mail; and The Sun.* The data was analysed using a feminist narrative approach.

In a healthy democracy, the media informs citizens on political issues, enabling debate and political participation, and holds political representatives to account. But the media is no longer fulfilling this democratic function. Newspaper ownership has become increasingly concentrated in a few powerful conglomerates. The Internet and social media created economic pressures that reduced journalistic standards. The UK press has resisted efforts to regulate it. The decline in media standards has accompanied the increasing input of billionaires and global far-right actors in our politics and our press.

Key findings

- The press has used its opposition to LGBTQ rights to oppose the EU and the ECtHR. It has done this by conflating the EU and ECtHR when reporting or commenting on legal cases. LGBTQ people, and major legal developments in LGBTQ rights, were also used to directly attack the EU, the ECtHR and the Human Rights Act 1998. By the 2010s, newspaper articles used support for LGBTQ rights to criticise pro-European politicians or to justify Brexit.

- The press linked its opposition to trans rights to its opposition to gay and lesbian rights. Some news articles opposed the first anti-discrimination protections for trans people because they might similarly lead to protections based on sexual orientation. After trans people won the right to legal gender recognition, some articles opposed it because they saw it as a step towards same-sex marriage. News articles later opposed marriage equality as part of general opposition to David Cameron's brand of liberal conservativism and support for remaining in the EU.

- Parts of the press have used criticisms of protections for LGBTQ people to stereotype Black, Brown and Muslim migrants. Many articles opposed the right to asylum on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation. Black, Brown and/or Muslim LGBTQ people were brought into association with deception and criminality. Trans rights were further joined to anti-migrant hostility and Islamophobia through the issue of free speech. Respect for trans people was portrayed as a threat to fundamental British liberties. Such stories undermine support for press regulation and hate crime legislation.

- Parts of the press portrayed rights for women and LGBTQ people as a challenge to established male power. Analysis revealed a broader societal concern that allowing trans people to legally change gender could result in ‘daughters’ inheriting male wealth. Articles opposing LGBTQ people serving in the military also opposed protection from dismissal for soldiers who became pregnant. Such articles portrayed both cis and trans women as a threat to the effectiveness of the British Armed Forces. Later, workplace rights and protections for cis and trans women were portrayed as a threat to post-Brexit Britain.

Where next?

Anti-trans media is a warning of a wider agenda: to withdraw the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights and repeal the Equality Act and Human Rights Act. Fundamentally, it is an agenda that fundamentally reshapes who belongs in Britain.

The time for action is now. We need a stronger intersectional coalition of advocates, journalists, policymakers, academics, and individuals who recognise anti-trans media as part of a bigger reactionary agenda. A cross-sector coalition should involve trans- and LGBTQ advocacy, groups advocating for migrants' rights, racial equality, disability rights and climate action, political parties and policymakers, as well as media reform campaigners.

We also need coordinated efforts to better regulate an increasingly hostile media system. Implementing Leveson in full would be an important first step. But we need to go further. We need to treat press and social media regulation as related issues. Working together, groups advocating against discriminatory and hateful speech online and in the mainstream media must identify steps forward for media regulation in the digital age and advocate to change the current system.

Introduction

A moral panic has been directed against trans people and their civil rights over at least the last decade[1]. Research shows this has been facilitated by the majority of UK media and amplified by social media. A Council of Europe report identified ‘vitriolic media campaigns’ that demonise and vilify trans women in particular[2]. The RESIST study has described UK media attention to trans people as ‘campaigning journalism’ that focuses on a supposed threat of ‘gender ideology’[3].

2017 is widely recognised as a key inflection point in this process. However, the transition from ‘freak show’ to a politically motivated anti-trans campaign goes back much further. The media often present trans people as a threat to women’s rights, LGB people and children. But trans people are not the only target. The press has been campaigning against human rights and equality law for decades.

This research examines the stories that the British press told about ‘Europe’ and LGBTQ rights between 1973 and 2017. The findings suggest an anti-rights agenda in the press. Anti-trans stories have been used as a political tool to attack European equality and human rights frameworks. Opposition to trans rights overlaps with opposition to gender equality, lesbian and gay rights, racial equality, migration and asylum rights, religious tolerance (especially towards Islam), disability rights and environmentalism.

In our analysis, press hostility towards marginalised groups has intensified with changes in the media landscape. These changes include increasingly concentrated press ownership and a pay-per-click advertising model. This model means that, in the social media age, there are financial incentives to publish stories that create outrage[4].

British politics today is marked by attempts to push trans people out of public life. Councils have defunded Pride events and reduced the visibility of LGBTQ content in libraries[5]. There is extreme hostility towards migrants. Visible anti-abortion rhetoric is on the rise. These attitudes have deep roots. Examining the media’s opposition to LGBTQ rights reveals the interconnected nature of different struggles.

It also enables us to reflect on how best to respond to the media and policy environment. The response requires the strengthening of an intersectional coalition to defend equality and human rights for all marginalised and minority groups. We also need to better regulate an increasingly hostile media system, including, but not limited to, the full implementation of Leveson.

The time for action is now. Anti-trans media is a warning of a wider agenda: to withdraw the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights and repeal the Equality Act and Human Rights Act. Fundamentally, it is an agenda that fundamentally reshapes who belongs in Britain.

What this report does and who it is designed to help

This report serves as the evidence base for the accompanying resource *'How anti-trans media undermines everybody's rights – a timeline'*. It explains the findings of the research and contextualises it in our knowledge of anti-trans media reporting. It connects current press hostility towards marginalised groups to a longer history of such coverage, and to changes in the media landscape that encourage such reporting. It also highlights the role of power dynamics and financial incentives in hostile reporting. Advocacy organisations which support LGBTQ people, trans people, or other groups who receive disproportionate media hostility, such as Muslims, migrants, or disabled people, often engage with policymakers about media attitudes, media ownership, and media reform. However, these organisations have limited time and capacity to find supporting evidence.

Policymakers, who also have limited time and capacity, need a strong evidence base when advocating for change. The research informing this report uses established methodological tools. Organisations and policymakers can use it to push for changes to rules on reporting accuracy or for a more responsive media regulator. Organisations can also use this report to challenge other anti-trans and anti-LGBTQ policies promoted by the press and by reactionary politicians and movements. This report also shows organisations working to support different groups that they share common ground. We hope that this report will help organisations to build capacity, and avoid replicating work done by other organisations and/or academics. It encourages organisations with shared aims to work together.

Background to the research

This report presents findings from the research project *'Gendering Europe: British national identity from EEC accession to EU secession'*, funded by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship. It set out to explore how ideas about gender and sexuality shaped representations of national identity within the mainstream and pink press coverage of the European Union (EU), and the UK's membership of it.

As the UK was facing the aftermath of the vote to leave the EU, what seemed like steady progress for trans rights was slipping back. Gender critical groups and their allies mobilised around the public consultation on gender recognition that Theresa May opened in 2018[6]. They organised concerted responses opposing a move to a self-declaration system. In some cases, they pushed for an outright rollback of trans rights[7]. The research explored whether this opposition to trans rights might have been part of the motivation for leaving the EU all along.

Many of the rights and protections that LGBTQ people have in the UK resulted from EU law and judgments by the ECtHR. The ECtHR is not an EU institution. Yet it has often been conflated in British political and media debates. The ECtHR enforces the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the international treaty that came into force in 1953 and today counts 46 countries as signatories. The rights enshrined in the ECHR were incorporated into UK law through the Human Rights Act 1998. This means UK courts enforce them.

Two major developments for trans people arose from the EU and ECtHR. Firstly, protection from discrimination on the basis of gender reassignment. This was covered under the 2010 Equality Act, but originated much earlier in a 1996 ruling by the European Court of Justice (ECJ), the EU's judicial body that enforces EU law. The court ruled in the case of *P vs S and Cornwall County Council* that trans people were protected under the EU's Equal Treatment Directive on sex discrimination at work.

Secondly, the UK passed the Gender Recognition Act 2004 after the ECtHR ruled that refusing trans people legal recognition in their lived gender breached the European Convention. The standing of Gender Recognition Certificates is now uncertain due to the Supreme Court ruling in *For Women Scotland Ltd. Vs. The Scottish Ministers (2025) UKSC 16* that 'sex' in the Equality Act 2010 refers to 'biological sex'[8].

By looking at the reporting of such developments, we can increase our understanding of the media coverage of the EU, ECtHR and Brexit. In doing so, it helps us to understand Brexit's implications for equality and human rights and the hostility to the ECHR among right-wing politicians.

Methodology

This report's findings are based on analysis of the four newspapers which were the most widely read within their category. These were a left/liberal broadsheet (*The Guardian),* a right-wing broadsheet (*The Telegraph*), a mid-range tabloid (*The Daily Mail*), and a traditional tabloid (*The Sun).* Articles were collected electronically from NexisUK, Gale's Telegraph and Daily Mail Historical Archives, and ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Articles from print and online editions were collected. This selection tends towards Eurosceptic coverage. However, it is representative of the UK media landscape, in which the Eurosceptic newspapers dominate.

The data collected in the full project covered five decades, from 1973, when the UK became a member of the European Economic Community (EEC) which would become the EU, to 2017. It extends beyond the EU referendum to cover media's response to Parliament's decision to trigger Article 50. It also assesses coverage of the first part of the UK-EU negotiations on the withdrawal process. The full project also analysed articles published in the pink press – news for and by the LGBTQ community. Approximately 2000 articles were analysed in total.

A range of search terms were used to reflect the changing language used over time. Searches for each newspaper were conducted using terms for LGBTQ people and 'Europe'. Articles selected for analysis included discussion of LGBTQ people and Europe, including the EEC, EU, ECHR and ECtHR, and individual European countries. Articles from general news, politics and law sections of the newspapers were included, and those from sections like sport and entertainment were excluded. News articles as well as commentaries and editorials were included. Articles published in the 1990s and 2000s, when coverage expanded, were selected if their headlines and first paragraphs focused directly on LGBTQ rights and European institutions. This step was taken to make data collection manageable.

This report primarily cites findings from the mainstream press from the 1990s onwards, when coverage opposing equality and human rights intensified in the press. We have also included some illustrative examples from the 2020s, identified using the project's original selection criteria but not yet analysed in full, to demonstrate the continuation of these stories up to the present day. The lack of quotes from *The Guardian* is a finding in itself – evidence of a broader anti-rights agenda primarily appeared in *The Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Sun*.

The data was analysed using a feminist narrative approach and coded using qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo. Feminist narrative analysis demonstrates how the media exercises power through stories. Narratives are stories with characters and a plotline with a beginning, middle and an end. The analysis considered two dimensions: storytelling *by* the media; and storytelling *through* the media.

In the first dimension, the media can be considered an arena which allows actors to communicate ideas to the public. Looking at this dimension allows us to consider which actors have the power and access to use that arena. The second dimension sees the media itself as an actor. This allows us to account for how journalists, editors, and the owners of newspapers shape the stories shared with the public. Their stories tell us about their values and priorities through news selection and through the techniques that they use to tell them. These dimensions are not completely distinct: who newspapers choose to quote and how they describe them requires journalistic and editorial decisions that may be shaped by the newspaper's political agenda.

The narrative analysis looked at four narrative elements: characterisation (who was featured and how they were depicted), emplotment (how events were used to create a plot for the reader), focalisation (from whose perspective was the story told), and relational setting (how the story was related to broader ideas, networks and institutions). Overall, media stories do several things: they can shape, identify, and determine who represents the community. They can also legitimise, or delegitimise, institutions, political parties or politicians, social movements, and ideas.

Growing threats to democracy

How the media represents minority groups can tell us a lot about how well our democracy works. A responsible media system is essential for a healthy democracy. Its role is to educate and inform citizens, to provide a space for public debate, and to provide people with the opportunity to feed into decision-making. The idea of the news media as the Fourth Estate rests on the press acting as a watchdog on the government[9], using its voice to represent ordinary citizens and hold our political representatives to account. In exchange, it has been granted freedom from regulation. But the findings presented in this report suggest the UK press is abusing its privileges. This section will show that the decline in the democratic function of the press has also accompanied the increasing input of billionaires and global far-right actors in our politics, and our press.

Journalism standards and the media economy

Media scholar Natalie Fenton has suggested that, under the current system, the link between the news and the public interest has been severed. In its place, market interests take priority[10]. News organisations prioritise profits over fulfilling their role within a democracy[11]. Closely entangled with political and economic elites, the media cannot fulfil its democratic function of public accountability[12].

Newspaper ownership has become increasingly concentrated in a few powerful conglomerates. The best known is the media empire owned by Rupert Murdoch, which started to expand in the UK in the 1980s. *News International*'s defeat of the print unions at Wapping in 1986 increased newspaper proprietors' power and made it difficult for new publications to succeed[13]. During the 1990s and 2000s, rules on media ownership were relaxed, particularly under the Broadcasting Act 1996 and the Communications Act 2003. Today, three companies own 90% of UK national newspapers[14].

In the UK, the development of media monopolies engrained a neoliberal bias in the news. This included an anti-EU editorial agenda which aligned with newspaper owners' economic interests[15]. Murdoch, in particular, opposed EU regulation that could limit monopolies in media ownership[16]. Research has shown that a 'bombardment' of Eurosceptic and anti-immigration articles by tabloid newspapers helped to swing the 2016 referendum[17].

The Murdoch press drove what is known as the 'tabloidisation' of journalism. The result was more sensationalist, simplistic, personalised and 'soft' news[18]. This change in journalism is evident when we look at opinion pieces and commentaries. A new 'conversationalist' tone reduced the ability of the news to develop informed and engaged citizens[19]. It led to columnists sharing outrageous 'opinions' while evading responsibility for any harmful effects of their language[20].

The Editors' Code of Practice of the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) has no mechanism to hold newspapers to account for articles labelled as 'opinion'. This can have devastating consequences. In 2013, a trans school teacher, Lucy Meadows, died by suicide after several months of intrusive press coverage of her transition. In returning his verdict, the coroner condemned the media coverage[21]. As we drafted this section of the report, Professor Jason Arday's death prompted more than fifty parliamentarians to sign a letter to IPSO calling for an investigation into media coverage of him[22].

The internet further reduced journalistic standards. People began reading news for free, online, rather than buying print newspapers. Because many journalists work precariously as freelancers, news stories have become shorter, less critical and less investigative[23]. Economic pressures have also affected diversity in news rooms. The Sutton Trust reported in 2025 that 50% of leading UK newspaper columnists had attended private schools[24].

Social media has also changed the news. News organisations now need to ensure people click on individual stories to secure advertising revenue. Journalists adapt stories to match different platforms and algorithms[25]. One way in which newspapers do this is by whipping up anger. Research suggests that they stage sexist, misogynistic and racist online commentary through the posting of news stories on social media[26]. Alison Phipps has described the practice of using right-wing content as clickbait part of the contemporary media's 'outrage economy'[27].

The UK press has resisted attempts to regulate it. The Government rejected statutory press regulation in 1995. The 2011 phone-hacking scandal revealed journalists had illegally accessed voicemails. This led to the 2012 Leveson Inquiry (Part I) into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press. The resulting report revealed a 'climate of prejudice' towards women, trans and intersex people, ethnic minorities and migrants. It stated that the press had published 'prejudicial or pejorative references to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation or physical or mental illness or disability' that are inappropriate in a mature democracy[28].

It recommended a new independent regulator be created and enshrined in law. A Royal Charter in 2013 established the Press Recognition Panel (PRP). The PRP is an independent body. It provides recognition to press regulators that comply with Leveson recommendations. To date, the only formally recognised regulator is IMPRESS. However, major newspapers refuse to sign up to it. Instead, they formed the non-Leveson compliant IPSO. Some introduced in-house self-regulation. In 2018 the Conservative government opted not to enact legal incentives to join a Leveson-compliant body. There is also no regulation around how journalists or news organisations use social media. In fact, journalism was explicitly excluded from the remit of the Online Safety Act 2023 under the guise of press freedom.

Billionnaires and the far-right

Alongside and intertwined with the changing media landscape, billionnaires and global far-right actors have increasingly influenced our politics, and our press.There is a well-documented close connection between the UK press and right-wing political parties. For example, in 2014 the billionnaire Richard Desmond, Chair of tabloid the Daily Express, became a UKIP donor. UKIP peer Lord Stevens was then appointed as deputy chair of the Express. Many current and former Conservative Party politicians have regular columns in major newspapers and magazines. Some even serve as editors. Politicians such as Reform UK leader Nigel Farage also work as TV and radio presenters.

There has been growing attention to the role of dark money in UK politics. A number of influential thinktanks and lobby groups have opaque sources of funding, including those associated with the Westminster address '55 Tufton Street'[29]. These groups have made inroads in the press. One example is the *Institute for Economic Affairs* (IEA), whose neoliberal economic ideas have long been promoted by newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*[30].

The IEA belongs to a donor network connected to Charles Koch, the billionaire CEO of Koch Industries, a major fossil fuel company[31]. Nancy Maclean argues that a key strategy of the Koch network is to restrict democracy in ways that better serve the wealthy[32]. This network promotes uncritical celebration of free market capitalism. It aims to roll back legislation on health and safety, workplace protections, and environmental protections. It rejects climate change. It also seeks to dismantle the welfare state through low taxation and increased privatisation.

In his book *Democracy for Sale*, journalist Peter Geoghegan describes the IEA as in the 'Brexit influencing game'. It advocated a 'hard Brexit' because if the UK remained a member of the single market (a 'soft Brexit'), the wider dismantling of EU regulations would fail[33]. This includes employment rights, such as protection from discrimination.

The IEA is also part of a lobby network that opposes trans rights. It has amplified the narrative that gender critical views are being silenced[34]. This aligns with the Koch network's aim of portraying a 'free speech crisis' on campuses[35].

Another relevant organisation is the LGB Alliance. OpenDemocracy reported in 2022 that it had an office at 55 Tufton Street, although the organisation has stated the address was chosen primarily for convenience[36]. Pink News also reported in 2020 that LGBA activist Gary Powell had links to the US religious right and anti-abortion groups[37]. Gina Gwenffrewi has described the group as 'astroturf', that is, a fake grassroots organisation masking vested interests[38]. Gwenffrewi traced how major newspapers gave greater prominence to the LGBA over more established LGBTQ charities. She found that newspaper stories referencing the LGBA mostly presented trans people's rights as a threat to the public[39].

Altogether, this analysis suggests a close connection between authoritarian politics, transphobia, and the political agenda of the right-wing press. This is leading to the breakdown of democratic standards. Actions which harm democracy can also be a particular site of harm for trans people and other marginalised groups, such as the introduction of voter ID requirements in England, Scotland, and Wales[40].

While minority groups were winning rights, media ownership was becoming more concentrated. The findings in this report suggest that the press has advanced an anti-rights agenda that serves the interests of billionaire proprietors, businesses, and conservative and far-right political actors. The history of the anti-trans moral panic shows that failing to take seriously media transphobia endangers the civil rights and liberties of everybody.

Findings by theme

Opposing trans rights to oppose 'Europe'

Parts of the press have used their opposition to trans rights to oppose the EU and the UK's membership of the ECHR. Anti-trans media reveal a much broader opposition to equality and human rights frameworks. In doing this, newspapers employ different narrative strategies.

Conflating the EU and ECtHR

Firstly, newspapers and Eurosceptic politicians have long – and consistently – conflated the EU and ECtHR in stories about LGBTQ rights[41]. This finding demonstrates how LGBTQ rights were weaponised for a bigger political purpose: to undermine UK membership of both institutions.

Conflation begins with references to the 'European court'. For example, reporting the ruling on *P vs S and Cornwall County Council*, *The Telegraph* stated in 1996 that '*Tory Euro-sceptics denounced this ruling as the latest example of "meddling" in Britain's affairs by the European Court'*[42]. The journalists themselves described it as the '*the latest in a series of European Court rulings that have opened the way for compensation claims totalling millions of pounds against the Government'*. Writing about a 'European court', without specifying which one, leaves readers struggling to differentiate between the EU's judicial body – the ECJ – and the court that enforces the ECHR – the ECtHR. In this case, the ECJ was the relevant body, while references to compensation claims related to the ECtHR.

Another way in which the EU and ECtHR are confused is in references to 'Brussels' or 'Strasbourg'. In an interview with *The Telegraph*, for example, the 3rd Viscount Rothermere, then proprietor of *The Daily Mail*, stated in 1998 that

> *Today, Parliament has completely ignored the Church, which, quite rightly, protested against lowering the age of buggery. But the House of Commons has now decided that buggery is moral and that has been sanctified by Brussels, so where are we?'*[43].

Rothermere was referring to a case against the UK about lowering the age of consent for gay and bisexual men. It was dealt with by the ECtHR and not the EU. The ECtHR sits in Strasbourg. Not Brussels or Luxembourg, where most EU institutions are based. This quote highlights how inaccurate references to 'Brussels' were used to discredit improvements in LGBTQ rights and appeal to wider Eurosceptic sentiments.

Opposing the EU and ECtHR

Secondly, LGBTQ people, and major legal developments in LGBTQ rights, were used to directly attack the EU, the ECtHR and the Human Rights Act 1998. This pattern intensified once LGBTQ

people started to win rights. In the 1980s, many articles accepted the rulings of the ECtHR when they ruled in favour of the UK government and against LGBTQ rights. For example, in the case of *Rees vs. United Kingdom*, *The Telegraph* reported that a '*transsexual who claimed that the Government's refusal to change his birth certificate violated his human rights lost his case in the European Court of Human Rights yesterday'* and that the judges had upheld the principles of English law[44]*.*

Yet, after the EU and ECtHR rulings against the UK, newspaper articles used opposition to LGBTQ rights to oppose European institutions generally. For example, just months after the *P vs. Cornwall* case, the *Daily Telegraph* published a commentary with the headline '*No sex change – we're British*[45]*.'* This was written by the newspaper's editor Dominic Lawson. Lawson is the son of Lord Nigel Lawson, then a prominent Eurosceptic Conservative Party peer, former MP and Chancellor of the Exchequer under Margaret Thatcher.

The article recounts a story of a trans woman who had apparently de-transitioned. This it uses to parody debates about the UK's possible adoption of the Euro, a deeply divisive question within the Conservative Party at the time. Lawson wrote that if the individual in question '*were a country, rather than a person, there would be a surgical solution….it is called the European Monetary Union'*. He continues

> *The applicant first of all must declare that he wishes to abandon the currency name he was born with. Then he must dress up in the clothing of the Exchange Rate Mechanism for at least two years; at the same time he must ensure that his Budget deficits run at the same level as other countries' – injections of foreign capital will be made available to ensure the proper hormonal balance. Then, at around the end of the century, comes the final, irrevocable operation. Away with that troublesome and independent member, sterilising. In with the smooth and harmonious Euro.*

The article makes a case against Britain's adoption of the Euro. It also implies that giving up the pound would be akin to castration:

> *Subscribing to European Monetary Union, however, is not mere financial transvestism. Once we have abolished our own currency, and replaced it with an artificial new one, then we shall have performed the full sex-change operation.*

If the UK later changed its mind, it would have '*the desire for our former capabilities, but will be pathetically unable to satisfy it'*. In our analysis, *The Telegraph* deploys this extended metaphor in order simultaneously to abuse trans people and argue that joining the Euro would pose a major threat to the UK. We would be impotent! The article suggests that being trans is incompatible with being British, a common theme in later coverage of the ECtHR.

Following *P. vs. Cornwall*, particularly hostile coverage then turned to a 2002 ruling in the case of *Christine Goodwin v. the United Kingdom* by the ECtHR that a trans person's inability to legally change their gender put the UK in breach of the European Convention. Alongside *2003 Bellinger v. Bellinger (House of Lords)*, this ruling led to the *2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA)*. The

principle of human rights was portrayed as an agenda. Worse: an assault on British values and British justice. For example, Gerald Warner wrote in *the Daily Mail* that

> *European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) rulings undermined the right of firms to sack employees for smoking cannabis, prevented prosecution of people for indecent behaviour in the street and insisted on the right of a "woman", who had undergone a sex change after fathering a child, to marry another man. Human rights is an aggressive political agenda. Anyone from a "victim" culture will almost certainly win in court. Anyone seeking to assert traditional rights, ways of life, parental authority or common decencies is on a hiding to nothing.*[46]

Articles like this further demonstrate how the press has misrepresented court rulings. While we cannot find the specific case reference, the case about smoking cannabis appears to relate to a British employment tribunal ruling that referenced the right to privacy under the European Convention in its decision in favour of the complainant. To wit: an employee's dismissal after being found with marijuana in the company car park was unfair[47].

In 2008 *the Daily Mail* published a list of ECtHR cases that it said '*highlight the utter madness of this damaging law'* (meaning the Human Rights Act). It wrote

> *DRUG addicts, prisoners, transvestites, travellers and terrorists are among those who have secured damaging human rights verdicts. Here we list 20 examples of how the Human Rights Act, working with the European Convention on Human Rights and Strasbourg judges, has wreaked havoc against common sense*[48]*.*

References to the rights of minorities such as 'transsexuals', 'transvestites', 'homosexuals', 'sexual deviants', 'travellers', and 'gypsies' appear alongside 'terrorists', 'murderers', and 'drug addicts'. Associating minorities with criminality serves a double purpose. It denies rights to individuals and portrays human rights protections as a risk to social stability.

The run up to the EU referendum

By the 2010s, newspaper articles brought criticism of LGBTQ rights into connection with opposition to EU membership and support for Brexit. This narrative intensified after the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to hold a referendum on EU membership. He did not pledge to leave the ECHR. Richard Littlejohn wrote in the *Daily Mail* that the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) did not have a *'forensically honed manifesto containing policies for everything from the funding of diversity workshops to transgendered toilet facilities'.* Yet, he argued, UKIP's plan for '*getting the hell out of the EU, scrapping the Yuman Rites Act and dismantling ridiculous, ruinous wind farms is a start…*[49]'.

Littlejohn here uses commitments to trans inclusion to mock mainstream parties and to support UKIP's call to withdraw from the EU and ECHR. His target seems to be the *Transgender Action*

Plan published in 2011 by the Conservative – Lib Dem coalition government. The article also demonstrates how opposition to environmental policies were connected to these issues too.

The following year, Littlejohn wrote in the Daily Mail that '*It's amazing the number of jailbirds who claim to be pagans and even transsexuals so they are entitled to special privileges'*. He went on to argue that

> *Britain has no need of laws made by unelected activist judges, based upon a foreign and wholly alien concept of justice and human rights. That's why we should scrap the Act and withdraw from the Convention. Labour and the Lib Dems would never support that because it would mean Britain having to leave the EU. Acceptance of the Human Rights Convention is a rigid condition of EU membership. But quitting the EU and the European Court would be the ideal outcome for Britain*[50]*.*

The same article viewed rights accorded to so-called 'illegal immigrants' primarily from Asia and the Middle East through the lens of criminality. There was pushback, though, to one of its claims. For this, the paper had to issue a correction. This stated that 'A comment article on 13 August about the European Court of Human Rights said that the supply of heroin and gay porn to prisoners was now a "right". We are happy to clarify that this was not meant to be taken seriously and is not the case.[51]'

Articles published during and after the referendum show that opposition to trans inclusion was not only closely associated with the media's support for Brexit. It also influenced the form they wanted EU withdrawal to take. After the new prime minister Theresa May proposed reforming the GRA, some articles used this support for trans rights to ridicule her approach to Brexit. Tim Stanley wrote in *The Telegraph* that the Conservative Party had:

> *endorsed transgenderism, swallowed the idea that Britain is a hate-filled country in need of more social workers, and refused to defend low taxes. Britain might have changed since the EU referendum, but the Tory wets fundamentally haven't*[52]*.*

The reference to the 'Tory wets' – a term coined by Thatcher to describe colleagues who opposed her free market neoliberal policies – shows that opposition to social liberal and welfare policies were closely connected to opposition to trans rights and right-wing press support for Brexit. In an editorial about May's Brexit negotiations, *The Telegraph* attributed declining trust and disillusionment with governments to an expansion of the welfare state, the sharing of sovereignty in the EU, and debates over 'trans toilets':

> *In Britain, a radical expansion of the welfare state in the Blair/Brown era saw many millions of people, some relatively well-off, drawn into the benefits system. In Europe, summit after summit saw a relentless transfer of power from Westminster and other national capitals to the various branches of the supranational European Union. Around the Western world, it sometimes seemed that political debate was focused on subjects – such as the necessity for transgender lavatories – which, while no doubt important to some, was to huge numbers of others hopelessly self-indulgent. To them, such discussion seemed symptomatic of administrations that had lost touch with what is, and always was, the single overriding preoccupation of voters everywhere: how do I and my family get on and do better in the world?*[53].

The press portrayed trans rights as 'elite' issues. As such trans rights ran contrary to the interests of 'hardworking families', as the above article suggests. This is a strategy that undermines working-class solidarity. In fact, trans people generally are more likely to have lower incomes, experience poverty, and be employed in precarious jobs than the wider population[54]. They experience high levels of discrimination at work, with access to bathrooms essential for their access to employment.

In the passage above, *The Telegraph* draws on a classic Conservative – and indeed, New Labour – narrative which opposes the welfare state[55]. The article also contrasts benefits claimants with hardworking families, who it is supposedly championing. In stigmatising benefits claimants, the paper evokes a narrative which denounces people unable to work and people unable to find work as 'scroungers' and 'skivers', albeit without using those terms[56]. This narrative has a negative impact on disabled people[57] and ignores the significant conditions that people must meet to access state support.

The Sun similarly linked opposing trans rights to its vision of a post-Brexit Britain. For example, Rod Liddle published a list of things he would like for Christmas 2017. Government ministers, he suggested, should '*stop grandstanding and finally pull together to get the best possible deal to leave the European Union.*' Also, he wanted '*transgender lobbyists to shut up for a few minutes and accept that chromosomes determine a person's gender*[58]*'*. In another article, *The Sun* demanded that teachers '*stop championing politically-correct reforms, such as transgender toilets, and focus on providing a decent education'* as part of the *'changes we want to see for Brexit-bound Britain*[59]*'.*

Opposing trans rights to oppose gay and lesbian rights

Parts of the right-wing press linked their opposition to trans rights to their opposition to sexual equality rights and protections. Newspapers opposed trans people's rights on the basis that they would extend rights for gay and lesbian people. This finding shows that supporting rights for lesbian, gay and bisexual people while excluding trans people is unlikely to be successful.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people had no protection from discrimination in the workplace until 2003. This came about through updates to the EU's *Employment (Framework) Directive.* LGBTQ people also could not serve in the UK Armed Forces until 2000. That ban was lifted after the ECtHR ruled, in 1999, that it was in breach of the right to private life. Marriage equality for same-sex couples was not achieved in England and Wales until 2013, Scotland until 2014, and Northern Ireland 2020.

Opposing protections from sexual orientation discrimination

One early case related to sexual orientation discrimination was *Grant v. South West Trains.* A lesbian employee took her employer to court over employment benefits – specifically free rail travel passes for partners – that she had been denied. The case was referred to the ECJ. In the end, it failed. However, the press reported it as a financial threat to employers and heterosexual workers. Anne McElvoy writing for *The Telegraph* in 1996 opposed the woman's claim alongside trans people's right to legal gender recognition:

> *When longing and the law meet, the result tends to be faintly farcical. Thus a lesbian railway clerk is taking South West trains to court on the grounds that the company unfairly discriminated against her by refusing to grant free rail travel to her live-in lover. Meanwhile the House of Lords is poring over the third reading of Lady Turner's absurdly named Sexual Orientation Discrimination Bill, and the European Court has ruled that a council was wrong to sack a college manager who underwent a sex change*[60].

In this extract, same-sex partnerships are delegitimised as a basis for employment rights (particularly through the emphasis on sex rather than marriage/family – 'live-in lover'). Legislation against sexual orientation discrimination was mocked as 'absurdly named'. Again, the article conflates the ECJ (the relevant court here) and the ECtHR.

Around this time, newspapers also covered the ban on LGBT soldiers in the Armed Forces. The *P. vs. Cornwall* judgment was positioned as a risk to the Armed Forces. Because, they claimed, it could lead to the ban being overturned.

The Telegraph reported that the High Court had referred the case of a navy medic who had been discharged due to his sexuality to the ECJ. Did it, the High Court inquired, contravene the EU Equal Treatment Directive? *The Daily Telegraph* cited the judge in the case who stated that, following *P vs Cornwall*,

> *there must be a real prospect that the European Court will take the further step to extend protection to those of homosexual orientation*[61].

The article continued: '*the ban, which is supported by ministers and senior officers, would have to be scrapped if the court ruled it contravened European law'*. With its headline '*Court threat to forces' gay ban',* The Telegraph portrayed a wider threat to the UK military. Former service personnel might claim *'millions of pounds in damages'*. Gay, lesbian and trans people's rights were presented as an economic threat to the nation, but also a cultural one, as responses to legal gender recognition show.

Opposition to equal marriage

The issue of legal gender recognition was before the ECtHR in the early 2000s. Press coverage was hostile. Some articles presented legal gender recognition as a step towards marriage equality for same-sex couples, which they opposed.

Writing in *the Daily Mail* in an article entitled 'human rights madness', Steve Doughty expressed concern that '*any law to give transsexuals freedom to marry would be likely to pave the way for legalised homosexual marriage.*[62]' The newspaper contested the possibility that someone can change their gender or sex. Therefore, a trans woman marrying a cis man, for example, was viewed as a same-sex marriage. Trans people's right to legal gender recognition was opposed because it was seen as leading to same-sex marriage, which was a greater threat.

Martin Howe is a barrister, former Conservative Party campaigner, Chairman of the referendum campaign Lawyers for Britain, and, as of 2024, a Reform Party campaigner. He wrote in the *Daily Mail* that a senior judge's conclusion that the European Convention may require countries to allow trans people to marry was '*profoundly dangerous for our constitution*[63]'. The article later suggests that the Human Rights Act would mean that '*the public will feel they have no way of overturning decisions which seem to fly in the face of their own ideas of decency, morality and common sense'*. While the article does not explicitly mention the wider marriage equality issue, its publication in the same issue as Doughty's article above means readers would likely connect them.

The issue of same-sex marriage reappeared during the 2010s in relation to the EU referendum and the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013*. EU membership and marriage equality were not related. Yet, they were joined to one another in the press. Shortly before Cameron formally promised a referendum in January 2013, for example, Stephen Glover argued in the *Daily Mail* in 2013 that Cameron was responsible for the rise of UKIP. He wrote that many people had

> *looked on in bewilderment as the Prime Minister has championed gay marriage, in defiance of many religious leaders, and despite there being no great pressure from the homosexual lobby to do so. This was the last straw for many Tory activists […] But the fact remains that in so often cleaving to the centre ground, and in speaking so dismissively of Conservative-minded people, Mr Cameron has aided and abetted the rise of UKIP, and lost the support of many more natural Tory voters.*[64]

Similarly, Andrew Pierce, a columnist for *the Daily Mail* and currently presenter for *GB News,* wrote in 2014 that Cameron had '*offended many traditional Conservative voters'*. He did this through '*his enthusiastic introduction of gay marriage, his pandering to his Lib Dem partners, his aides smearing Ukip supporters as "swivel-eyed loons", and his delusion that he can get Britain a better deal from the EU'*[65]. Such articles oppose marriage equality as part of general opposition in the right-wing press to Cameron's brand of liberal conservativism. References to a 'homosexual lobby' are echoed in contemporary anti-trans coverage that speaks of a 'trans lobby'.

These kinds of stories also appeared around the time of the referendum. In 2016, the *Daily Mail* criticised Cameron's proposed EU reform deal and his support for marriage equality on the basis that '*he rode roughshod over their opposition to legalising gay marriage*' and had '*told MPs to disregard what they say on Europe'*. The paper argued in the editorial that '*rather than listen to the passionately-held opinions of ordinary Tories, Mr Cameron [had sided] with Britain's Establishment elites; big business, the universities, the banks, the Civil Service and the BBC'*[66]. This quote shows how opposition to gay rights was part of a broader populist story about the 'elites' as a threat to 'ordinary people'.

The withdrawal process began in earnest, with the triggering of Article 50, in March 2017. Leo McKinstry of *the Daily Mail* then published a long article entitled *'Is Nicky Morgan the Biggest Hypocrite in Politics?'*, referring to the then Conservative MP. The focus is her position on Brexit. She had campaigned with pro-European groups against a so-called 'hard Brexit'. Now she was voting to trigger Article 50. But then the article turned to other issues related to her apparent support for *'progressive orthodoxy'*. She had previously voted against marriage equality. Now, she said, she had changed her mind. As Equalities Minister and Education Secretary she had, the article claimed, *'performed a volte-face, eagerly embracing the entire gay rights agenda'* and '*even flew a transgender remembrance flag over the Department for Education'*.[67] We read this as trans identities reappearing within a wider story opposing LGBTQ rights and liberal conservatism, and supporting Brexit.

Opposing LGBTQ rights to oppose migration and racial equality

Our findings show that parts of the press have used criticisms of protections for LGBTQ people as a way to stereotype Black, Brown and Muslim migrants and refugees. Press opposition to LGBTQ rights has been connected to opposition to migration and asylum rights, racial equality policies, and to negative portrayals of Muslims for decades.

Back in the 1970s and 1980s, the press already saw connections between support for migration, racial equality legislation, and rights for different marginalised groups. *The Telegraph* reported in 1974 that the Liberal Party was committed to pragmatic support for Common Market alongside racial equality, women's rights and gay rights[68]. And in 1982 the Daily Mail reported that Michael Foot's leadership of the Labour Party was under pressure amidst the publication of a document by Tony Benn and supporters whose 'plan for Marxist Britain' would reportedly mean

> *the 1971 Immigration Act and the 1981 British Nationality Act would be repealed with the "highest priority", while positive action programmes would be introduced to help blacks. The House of Lords would be abolished. Britain would leave the Common Market, troops withdrawn gradually from Northern Ireland, the Prevention of Terrorism Act repealed, homosexual age of consent reduced to 16, and all Tory trade union legislation replaced*[69].

In these articles, these connections form part of a general opposition to the left and to progressive change. Later, however, criticism of LGBTQ rights was used to oppose the right to asylum and human rights frameworks specifically.

Opposing the right to asylum

By the 2010s, these connections were drawn explicitly to challenge human rights frameworks. Many articles oppose the right to asylum on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation. Stories frequently focus on Black, Brown and/or Muslim people seeking asylum.

In 2010, *the Daily Telegraph* reported that European Union Agency on Fundamental Rights (FRA) had '*attacked'* the Czech Republic's practice of *'phallometric testing*' on gay asylum seekers from Islamic countries. The controversial test measures arousal following exposure to heterosexual pornography. This then becomes the basis for deciding whether an individual is lying about their sexuality[70]. This, the FRA said, '*could fall foul of the European Charter of Human Rights*.'[71]

The article does not explicitly defend the testing. Rather, it emphasises the EU's 'attack' on a member state on the basis of human rights law. As such, it aligns with overarching media stories about the supposed threat of equality and human rights frameworks and an apparent overreach of European institutions.

Some articles question the reliability of LGBTQ people seeking asylum. In 2014, the Daily Mail reported that the ECJ had banned the practice of sexuality tests. It ruled it '*unlawful for the British government to expect gay asylum seekers to prove their sexuality*'. It stated '*the case was brought against the Dutch Government by three men – including a Ugandan and one from a Muslim country – but must now be applied across the EU*'[72]. As such, the article implicitly casts doubt on the trustworthiness of Black and Muslim refugees. It also portrays the EU as an institution that prevents Britain, and indeed all member states, from controlling immigration. The ruling was later addressed in January 2017 when Sue Reid reported in *the Daily Mail* that

> the number of asylum-seekers claiming refuge in Britain because of their sexuality has rocketed by 450 per cent in five years. These include 1,115 people who argue that being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender means they would face discrimination if they returned to their home country. Most were from Pakistan but they also came from Jamaica, Nigeria and Ghana[73]

The article does not report how many of these applications were actually granted. Nor does it say whether their sexuality formed a core part of the claim. Figures later reported by *Reuters* indicate that only 22% of sexuality-based asylum claims were approved in 2017, context which the article does not provide.[74]

The article also focuses on asylum cases apparently being heard in secret. This, it argues, means that '*even foreigners with blatantly bogus stories, criminal records or who are a potential danger to society can stay under the radar'*. It suggests a conspiracy to use human rights protections for LGBTQ people to facilitate Black and Muslim migration to the UK.

Such stories continue to be published in the 2020s. Now they are connected to trans people. For example, in 2025, Andrew Neil wrote in the *Daily Mail* that

> *Then there's the Jamaican drug dealer, a career criminal sentenced to 40 months in prison for dealing in crack cocaine and heroin, who managed to avoid deportation to his native island by claiming his daughter was transgender and could speak about it only to him […] One day, perhaps sooner than many think for we live in febrile times, we could leave the ECHR, forcing Parliament to lay down a more sensible and restricted framework of basic rights[75].*

We make no finding about the accuracy of Neil's statement about this individual, but the framing provides further evidence of how the rights of trans people are used to challenge protections under, and the UK's membership of, the ECHR, and therefore human rights protections generally.

And in October 2026, the *Daily Mail* published an 'exclusive' story about a 'Bangladeshi trans woman' who was 'accused of helping dozens of straight asylum-seekers get into Britain by pretending to be gay'[76]. They were using European Convention rights to do so. The paper reported that the woman herself had originally been granted asylum as a gay man. We interpret such stories as bringing Black, Brown and Muslim LGBTQ people into association with deception and criminality.

Despite the publication of many articles criticising or opposing LGBTQ rights, they are defended as a British value when contrasted with Muslim countries. David Cameron, as Prime Minister, claimed in 2013 that '*Britain is the best place to be gay, lesbian or transgender anywhere in Europe'*. He also signalled his intention to open discussions with Commonwealth nations about the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Richard Littlejohn responded in the Daily Mail: '*I rather doubt that Commonwealth nations such as Bangladesh and Botswana will be queueing up to put same-sex marriage on the statute book'*. He went on to state that

> *If Cameron was serious, he could consider making the extension of gay rights a condition of receiving overseas aid from Britain. Somehow, though, I can't see the government in any Muslim country reacting too kindly to being told they'll get the cheque only if they agree to let same-sex couples get married in the central mosque immediately after Friday prayers.[77]*

Here, Littlejohn mocks the idea that Muslim countries would allow marriage equality. It is true that no majority-Muslim country has legalised same-sex marriage. However, the reference to mosques implies that Islam is particularly homophobic. In fact, UK law does not currently permit the Church of England to perform same-sex marriages. Further, in 2026 it dropped plans to introduce blessing ceremonies.[78]

In another 'satirical' column in 2016, Littlejohn mocks both gender-affirming care for trans people and protection for LGBTQ people seeking asylum. The column is written from the perspective of Alf Garnett – a famously bigoted fictional character in the British TV show 'Til Death Do Us Part'. Littlejohn portrays Garnett as a 'bleedin' heart liberal'. He describes a scene in which his neighbour announces that they had '*had a sex change*', to which Garnett responds:

> *Says [in The Guardian] that since the Conservatives got in six years ago, there's been a 1,000 per cent rise in people being treated on the NHS for gender disswossname. Makes you proud to be British but only if we stay in the EU. I'm going down the pub, or I would be if it hadn't been turned into a safe space for bi-curious Afghan asylum-seekers*[79]

Here, mockery of trans people and queer people seeking asylum serves to belittle pro-Europeans, progressives and indeed 'modernising' Conservatives in Britain.

Rare support for LGBTQ people appears in relation to the sexual assaults that took place in public spaces in Cologne, Germany, on New Years Eve 2015/16. Almost 500 incidents of sexual assault were ultimately reported to the police[80]. The perpetrators were reported to have been 'non-German' and of Black or North African appearance. In some of these articles, two trans women who were assaulted were included within the category of vulnerable women. This differs from the frequent media depiction of trans people, especially trans women, as threats[81].

The Sun published an article entitled 'Cologne mobs will reach UK'[82]. In it, Vote Leave campaign director Dominic Cummings was quoted as warning that '*Britain cannot stop migrants blamed for German sex attacks arriving'" and the "'safer choice" was to leave the EU'*. Cummings' call for Brexit appears alongside a report in the same article that '*three youths of North African descent have been arrested for allegedly attacking two transgender women in Dortmund, Germany'*. In the same issue*, The Sun* also asks:

> *What about the transgender couple stoned in German city Dortmund? What about the German minister who forecast another 10 million migrants coming to Europe? […] This argument has only just begun. By June we will be voting 60-40 to get out. Thank God'*[83].

Is the sympathy implied in such articles genuine? Or just another instance of the press positioning marginalised groups against each other in pursuit of a wider agenda?

A disingenuous approach to free speech

Trans rights were further joined to anti-migrant hostility and Islamophobia through the issue of free speech and freedom of the press. Freedom of the press became a key theme around the time of the 2012 Leveson Inquiry and Report. It is marked by a concerted effort to collapse the very different issues of 'freedom of the press from state intervention' and 'right to offend' into one single category. The aim is to undermine hate speech laws in the UK.

Debates about press regulation overlapped with debates about media representation of trans people, following Lucy Meadows' death in 2013. Press freedom also came to the fore in 2015 following the terror attack at the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*.

Newspapers depicted attempts at press regulation as an attack on the free press by the so-called 'liberal elite'. It was suggested that press freedom – and freedom of speech more broadly – should be absolute. Freedom of speech was redefined as a right to offend minority and marginalised groups. The right to 'offend' trans people and Muslims was connected to criticisms of press regulation and 'no platforming'. For example, *The Sun* wrote that press freedom had

> *always involved upholding the right to be offensive. That's why we should insist on the right of Charlie Hebdo or anybody else to publish what they believe to be true, whether it risks upsetting Muslims or Mumsnet, Tories or the transgender community*[84].

Stories of a press under attack serve a purpose. The media scholar Des Freedman argues that the media response to Charlie Hebdo allowed the press to portray itself as guardians of free speech. This, in turn, helped deflect pressure for regulation resulting from its abuses of power documented in the phone-hacking scandal[85].

Broader stories about freedom of speech similarly imply that it should be absolute. For example, in *The Daily Telegraph,* Allison Pearson wrote that

> *Just as the UK was involved in a global fight against fundamentalism, 2015 saw a growth of the shrill domestic variety. Freedom of thought and speech were howled down by university students, of all people, who "unplatformed" speakers they didn't agree with and demanded "safe spaces" where their delicate sensibilities could be protected. […] Germaine Greer ran into similar abuse when she insisted that Caitlyn (formerly [deadname redacted]) Jenner, who was named one of Glamour magazine's Women of the Year, wasn't actually female at all. "Just because you lop off your dick and then wear a dress doesn't make you a f------ woman," said Dr `Greer, in her famously tactful Australian manner. Matters were further confused when it was reported that Caitlyn was still in possession of the full meat and two veg. Social media, always on the lookout for another minefield, blew up over the issue of transgender people, a minor topic that came to prominence in 2015. This*

> *year ended, as it began, with a massacre in Paris; 130 victims, many young people out enjoying themselves in cafés and at a rock concert, were cut down by jihadists who had slipped with disturbing ease into Europe from Syria[86].*

In our reading, the article brings students calling for spaces that are respectful of trans people into connection with Islamic extremists through references to the 2015 Paris terror attacks. In turn, the terrorist threat is associated with asylum migration. Most of the attackers were French and Belgian nationals, although it has been reported that at least one returned to the EU via Greece posing as a refugee[87]. While the article does not discuss press regulation, its publication, we argue, serves the argument of free speech as right to offend.

Similarly, shortly before the referendum, Hannah Furness reported in *The Telegraph* comments by Timothy Garton Ash, Professor of European Studies at Oxford University. Furness reports that Garton Ash discussed four threats to free speech. The first mentioned was the Government's *Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015.* As part of the Prevent strategy, the Act imposed a duty on public sector organisations to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism[88]. It has been used primarily, though not exclusively, to monitor Muslims[89]. For universities, the Prevent duty has involved a securitisation of university campuses through censorship powers granted to police[90], therefore limiting the free speech of Muslims on university campuses[91]. Garton Ash argues that the duty would *'prevent non-violent extremists speaking on campus',* which, he said, would have included thinkers such as Jesus Christ.

The second of Garton Ash's threats to free speech was reported to be *'a certain push from below from our own students demanding so-called safe spaces'*[92]. He referenced the 'no-platforming' of second-wave feminist Germaine Greer due to her commentary about trans people. He said:

> *We as universities really have to hold the line. Our free speech in Britain is gradually being salamisliced away. This country, which in a way invented the modern version of free speech in the 17th century, is in my view much too feeble when it comes to standing up for free speech.*

In our reading, discussing these issues together as key threats to free speech has a particular effect. It equates student efforts to build universities that are inclusive for trans people with a programme employing the arms of state power to monitor primarily racialised students. Whether or not Garton Ash intends it, the pairing suggests trans people and their allies operate similarly to authoritarian states and terrorist groups. The implication is, in turn, that respect for trans people erodes fundamental British liberties. That the article foregrounds only these two of Garton Ash's reported four threats to free speech, and places them together in the headline 'Student demand for "safe spaces" and anti-radicalisation rules are slicing away free speech', is further evidence of this reading.

A similar story about free speech was told in relation to the education system. James Delingpole, a self-described climate change sceptic[93], wrote in a 2015 *Daily Mail* article that

> *if even the feminist Germaine Greer can get herself banned from a campus for having suggested that many women think male to female transgender people "do not look like, sound like or behave like women", what does that tell us about the warped priorities of this generation… If every child leaves school believing that Britain's imperial history is evil, that open-ended human rights must be extended to everyone, including the wicked and the criminal, and that the world is getting catastrophically hotter, then eventually everyone in Britain will hold those views, and, crucially, anyone who dares to challenge them will be a social outcast. If that happens, with every passing year, a country with a long and proud history of liberalism will, ironically enough, become a baston of intolerance[94].*

This article suggests that promoting respect for trans people alongside educating young people about Britain's colonial history, human rights, and climate change ultimately presents a threat to British freedoms.

Concern about free speech in universities and schools has long played a part in opposing social change in relation to race, gender and sexuality. In fact, the issue of 'free speech' was prominent in the late 1960s and 1970s. It surfaced in the populist discourse of far-right Conservative MP Enoch Powell, who saw student and transnational movements as a significant threat to national structures of authority. Camilla Schofield's research on Enoch Powell revealed that around 1970, the politics department at the University of Birmingham cancelled an appearance by him because of safety concerns. He responded in outrage at the supposed denial of his freedom of speech (although it did later take place)[95]. The debates about 'free speech' in the press therefore hide another agenda: opposing progressive change.

Opposing trans rights to oppose gender equality rights

Parts of the press have painted rights for women and LGBTQ people as a challenge to established male power in traditionally masculine domains. Trans rights are often described as a threat to 'women's rights' in mainstream media stories. This report shows that press opposition to trans people's rights, and LGBTQ rights more broadly, has in fact been connected to its *opposition* to gender equality. Rights for lesbian women were sometimes contested similarly to how trans women's rights are contested today.

Since second-wave feminism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, cis women (women who do not identify as trans) have equal legal rights to men in a wide range of areas. There followed an anti-feminist backlash in the UK press during the late 1980s and early 1990s[96]. Today, opposition to gender equality rights is tied up in wider political and media backlash against Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policies.

Aristocracy and inherited wealth

Analysing media coverage of legal gender recognition revealed a broader concern. Allowing trans people – and specifically trans men – to legally change gender could challenge male power and wealth. Specifically, 'daughters', people assigned female at birth, might inherit male wealth as trans men.

Harry Yorke in *The Telegraph* linked proposals to reform the *Gender Recognition Act 2004* to introduce a system of self-identification to the inheritance of aristocratic titles and land by men. That is, male-line primogeniture which, Zoë Playdon argues, has 'long been a 'sticking point for trans equality'[97]. The article was headlined '*how to switch from girl to earl in one simple step*[98]*'*. It discussed the possibility that the eldest daughter of the Fifth Earl of Balfour could, under the new proposals, simply change gender to inherit the family property and title.

As he had no male heirs, the Earl's title and estate would otherwise go to his younger brother upon his death. The Earl himself was campaigning for a change to the law on male-line primogeniture to ensure his daughters inherited his estate. However, this headline immediately suggests that self-declaration of gender would provide a kind of 'how-to' guide to accessing the privileges of aristocratic men. By emphasising that the proposed gender recognition process would take place '*without medical checks'* the article also implies it could be used deceptively.

Concern around male-line primogeniture in connection with legal gender recognition for trans people was not restricted to a few individuals. Newspaper coverage of a 1989 case on legal gender recognition that went to the ECtHR revealed the UK Government arguing that original birth certificates were needed '*to establish the connection of families for purposes of succession, legitimacy and the distribution of property*'[99].

The concern over the impact of trans people's legal gender recognition on the British male birthright was certainly significant. For this reason, the GRA included a specific exception for the inheritance of peerages or other male-only hereditary titles in order to '*avoid anomalies of succession*'. Government confirmed that this would cover a case in which '*a female-to-male transsexual could bypass the first-born son and inherit a title of honour*'[100]*.* Also, '*any property that passes with it*'[101]. Historically, then, the right to legal gender recognition was opposed in politics and in the press in order to preserve the inheritance and access to political power (through a peerage) of 'first-born sons'.

Military

The military was another domain in which the press portrayed cis and trans women's rights as a threat to male power. Some articles that covered the ban on LGBT service personnel also mentioned an earlier ban on pregnant service personnel. This required the immediate discharge of anybody who became pregnant. Exceptions for the Armed Forces in the UK's *Sex Discrimination Act 1975* were however ruled incompatible with the then EEC's Equal Treatment Directive 1978[102].

Colonel Bob Stewart, a former soldier, commentator and later Conservative Party MP (2010-2024), wrote in the Daily Mail in 2001 that '*once the envy of the world, the British Armed Forces are in danger of becoming a laughing stock*'[103]. The military had apparently provided soldiers with breast implants and gender-affirming surgeries. Stewart wrote that

> *Anyone who is so fixated about their breast size or so emotionally troubled by their gender has absolutely no place in a fighting army - especially not a British one with its extraordinary record of courage. The ideal soldier is physically tough and mentally balanced, so a serviceman who needs lipo-suction or a sex change is in the wrong job. And, dare I ask how a female soldier, who is so distressed by remarks about her appearance that she has to resort to implants, would cope under fire?*

The claim is not supported by the parliamentary record. The *Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence* stated in 2003 that breast implant operations were not provided for cosmetic reasons but for clinical ones following, for example, cancer treatment[104]. The article went on to argue that the Army

> *depends for efficiency on hierarchy, discipline and a certain ruthlessness. Yet, thanks to political influences and the demands of the European Convention of Human Rights, that spirit is being lost. We can see this all too clearly in, for example, the vast compensation payouts to servicewomen who break their contracts by becoming pregnant.*

The article also, again, conflated ECtHR and EU court rulings because it was EU legislation that was relevant regarding compensation to pregnant service personnel.

Beyond this, the article portrays all women as a threat to the British military and national security. It uses common tropes of women as weak and preoccupied with their appearance. It also suggests that rights for legal gender recognition and rights for pregnant workers risk the effectiveness of the Armed Forces.

Parliament and the workplace

Later, rights and protections for both cis and trans women were portrayed as a threat to post-Brexit Britain. Richard Littlejohn wrote in a 2017 *Daily Mail* column about the parliamentary vote to trigger Article 50. Conservative MP, Chloe Smith, brought her newborn baby. Describing women MPs breastfeeding in the House of Commons as 'showing off', Littlejohn mused that

> *if female members are to be allowed to breastfeed, then surely MPs from farming constituencies should be allowed to milk cows on the floor of the House*[105]*.*

Littlejohn criticised the then Speaker John Bercow MP for allowing Smith to enter the Chamber with her baby. Littlejohn argued that he '*never misses an opportunity to demonstrate how modern and inclusive he is*', including through supporting trans women's access to toilets in Parliament. The article implies that gender-based inclusion, whether for breast-feeding mothers, or trans

people seeking access to bathrooms that align with their gender, threatens national identity. Littlejohn's argument in favour of 'antiquated' institutions is that *'they remind us of our proud history and maintain an air of permanence and stability in a fast-changing, neophiliac age*'. Ultimately, both Thatcherite and right-wing media Euroscepticism were inseparable from hostility to trans rights.

Finally, protections for cis and trans women were connected in discussions about hate speech laws. In *The Sun* on new guidelines on the prosecution of hate crimes on social media, Brendan O'Neill wrote:

> *Make the mistake of drunkenly tweeting that a female politician you don't like is a "bitch" or write a Facebook post questioning whether trans women are "real' women and you could be judged unfriendly and have your collar felt by the cops*[106]*.*

It should be noted that misogynistic, homophobic and/or transphobic speech is not a standalone crime in the UK[107]. Discriminatory speech against LGBTQ people can be treated as an aggravating factor in sentencing for other offences. Such claims by the press therefore misrepresent UK legislation.

Summarising the argument of a book *Censored* by Paul Coleman, O'Neill claimed in the same article that hate crime legislation in Europe was being used to punish people for their religious opinions. He went on: '*under the guise of tackling hate, 21st century Europe is resurrecting the Inquisition and criminalising people who have the "wrong" views'*. The article omits the fact that Coleman is the Executive Director of the *Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) International*. *ADF International* is affiliated with the US-based ADF, which is an organisation within the Koch donor network[108]. An 2026 investigation by the Good Law Project found a three-fold increase in funding for the *ADF International's* UK wing since 2020, which it reported was primarily used for anti-abortion activity[109]. We interpret this story as further evidence that such press reports about hate speech serve a broader anti-rights agenda.

Where next?

Parts of the right-wing press want to repeal the Human Rights Act and erode the Equality Act. They would like the UK to withdraw from the European Convention. This would affect women, queer folk, Black and Brown people, people seeking asylum, disabled people and all workers in the UK. It is part of a global movement challenging civil rights around the world.

The anti-rights agenda already has the support of political parties in the UK. The Conservative Party has pledged to withdraw from the European Convention, repeal the Human Rights Act, and overhaul the Equality Act[110]. Reform UK has gone further, pledging to replace the Human Rights Act with a British Bill of Rights[111]. It has also proposed replacing the 2010 Equality Act with a 'Women and Motherhood Act'. The Trade Unions Congress suggests this would remove the right to equal pay between women and men for work of equal value[112]. The place of equality and human rights within the UK's legal system seems far from settled.

In this context, our findings suggest that the anti-trans moral panic may be read as a strategy by billionaire media owners to undermine wider public support for human rights and equality

protections. But the contemporary media economy intensifies it. Press regulators have demonstrated little willingness to balance press freedoms with the protection of minority groups[113]. Findings show that newspapers have also defended the right to offend minority groups.

IPSO, for example, rejects most complaints about discriminatory reporting against individuals – in 2018, for example, it acted on only two out of 8,000 complaints about discrimination[114]. Clause 12 (Discrimination) of its Editors' Code of Practice applies only to prejudicial content published about individuals[115]. The Code provides no way to hold newspapers to account for publishing stories that legitimise discrimination towards minority groups[116].

News media are increasingly reliant on the outrage economy for visibility and revenue. In the AI age, Big Tech leaders seek to influence global democratic processes in support of their business model. This includes supporting far-right parties and undermining efforts to fight disinformation and improve online safety[117]. It also includes a political agenda not only promoting deregulation but seeking to fundamentally restructure the state[118]. Attacks on civil rights will only get worse.

We need a stronger intersectional coalition that works together on defending equality and human rights for everybody. To build this, we need to recognise anti-trans media as part of a bigger reactionary agenda. A cross-sector coalition should involve trans- and LGBTQ advocacy, groups advocating for migrant rights, racial equality, disability rights and climate action, political parties and policymakers, and media reform campaigners.

It also needs coordinated efforts to better regulate an increasingly hostile media system that generates outrage about equality and human rights protections for the most vulnerable groups in society. Such coverage is likely driven by financial incentives[119]. Implementing Leveson in full, including measures to incentivise the use of a Leveson-compliant regulator, would be an important first step.

But we need to go further. We need to treat press and social media regulation as related issues. The digital age has fundamentally changed – and will continue to change – how the news operates and how it treats minority groups. Working together, groups advocating against discriminatory and hateful speech online and in the mainstream media, and those researching these issues, must identify steps forward for media regulation in the digital age and advocate to change the current system.

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