

## Identity politics

## 'Identity politics' is a divisive ideology that has come to dominate public debate.

It fractures society into groups formed around characteristics such as gender, sexuality or ethnicity, pitting people against one another in an arms race of victimhood. It also shuts down debate: expressing anything but the most socially liberal views on issues such as transgenderism, homosexuality or abortion makes you unfit for any public office or platform.

This briefing explains more about what identity politics is and why it is such a threat to freedom, which includes religious liberty.

## WHAT IS IDENTITY POLITICS?

Broadly speaking, identity politics can be described as a worldview that judges people by their differences and what groups they belong to – groups such as gender, sexuality, religion and ethnicity. A person's value and importance do not depend on their character or the fact they are a human being, but on which groups they belong to and how 'oppressed' those groups have been.

Identity politics, as we encounter it today, teaches that these groups must fight for 'equality', undo what they find oppressive



and right historical wrongs. Some groups have been more oppressed than others. Everyone's needs and opinions must be weighed against how 'privileged' their group has been in the past. Instead of reconciling people's differences and working for common goals, identity politics divides society into separate groups with their own concerns, stokes hostility and silences dissent.

"The aim of identity politics would appear to be to politicize absolutely everything. To turn every aspect of human interaction into a matter of politics."<sup>1</sup> DOUGLAS MURRAY, THE MADNESS OF CROWDS

### **CIVIL RIGHTS**

The abolition of slavery, universal suffrage and the civil rights movement are all rightly seen as great advances in history. Although modern identity politics may seem in line with such fights for equality, it is actually far removed from them.

Our dignity and equality before the law stem from the truth that we are all equal before God. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr were



appalled by the injustices and segregation of society because they believed that everyone is made in God's image, whether male or female, black or white. He did not deny these differences but looked for a day when people "will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character".<sup>2</sup>

The civil rights movement was an appeal to conscience and common grace; an attempt to destroy the identity politics that defined people by their characteristics and reinforced divisions in society.

## **IDENTITY POLITICS IN ACTION**

Identity politics has been particularly influential in campus culture in both the UK and the US. Gay rights activist Peter Tatchell and feminists Germaine Greer and Julie Bindel have all faced accusations of transphobia, with critics saying they should be 'no-platformed'.

More extreme examples of campus censorship in the past five years have included:

Oxford University history professor Selina Todd has been instructed by university authorities not to attend lectures without two male bodyguards.<sup>3</sup> Trans activists made

threats against her after she stated publicly that 'trans women' should not be admitted to women-only spaces. After seeing the available evidence, Todd herself took the threats of physical violence from pro-trans protestors seriously.<sup>4</sup> s made His v

In 2015 **Yale professor Nicholas Christakis** was surrounded by outraged students in the university grounds and accused of racism.<sup>5</sup> His wife, also a Yale professor, had earlier



emailed students suggesting that they should exercise their own judgement when deciding whether to wear Halloween costumes borrowed from other cultures.<sup>6</sup> Christakis was called "disgusting" and accused of having "created space for violence to happen".<sup>7</sup>

In 2017 a group of students at Evergreen State College instructed white students and teaching staff (faculty) to stay off campus for a day to show solidarity with black students and faculty.<sup>8</sup> One member of the faculty, **Bret**  Weinstein, expressed doubts in an email to staff about whether this exclusion of white students was fair. Weinstein was subsequently accosted and filmed by students who called his email 'racist'. The 'anti-racist' protestors went on to threaten students and staff with weapons, and even took members of the administration hostage.<sup>9</sup>



## **TERMINOLOGY**



#### Privilege

The result of belonging to a group in society considered to have benefited from the 'oppression' of a minority group.

**No-platforming** Barring someone from speaking because they do not agree with certain views. Even the most liberal speakers can fall out of favour.

#### Intersectionality

When someone belongs to more than one 'victim' group, amplifying the 'oppression' they experience.

#### Microaggression

The most subtle forms of 'oppression', including even the most indirect or unintentional words or behaviour deemed to reinforce stereotypes or discrimination.

## WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON?

Undermining any objective basis for identity is an essential part of identity politics, which sees the world as a series of power plays. All racial, gender and sexuality-based categories only exist as a result of the strong 'oppressing' the weak.

This means identity politics can involve the denial of seemingly obvious facts about identity. On the one hand, there has been a rise in people identifying as part of groups they don't belong to. People saying they are the opposite sex is the most obvious example.

On the other hand, people are being told they are *not* part of groups





they clearly do belong to. In 2018, black musician

Kanye West was effectively accused

of not being truly black because he endorsed Donald Trump.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in 2016 a columnist in the LGBT newspaper *The Advocate* described openly gay PayPal founder Peter Thiel as "not a gay man" because of his political beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

## WHERE DOES IDENTITY POLITICS COME FROM?

In the 1960s and 1970s, philosophers like Michel Foucault proposed that human beliefs were mainly shaped by dynamics of power between people, not truth.<sup>12</sup> Some examples of this way of



Michel Foucault 🛇

thinking are uncontroversial: we can agree, for example, that dangerous eugenic ideas served the interests of slave owners and imperial expansionists. But other examples tear at the very foundations of our relationship with truth, such as the assertion that rationality and logic are nothing more than an invention of western colonial power.<sup>13</sup>

Under this radical way of seeing the world, the job of good people is to 'deconstruct' all 'false' distinctions, releasing everyone to live 'truly free' lives.

In time, this way of thinking gave force to Queer Theory, a radical LGBT ideology with the aim of removing almost all boundaries around sexual behaviour. Any sexual restrictions are taken by Queer Theory to be acts of oppression. Queer Theory in turn contributed to a stream of thought in which the very ideas of man and woman came to be seen as constructed, giving impetus to transgender ideology.

The 'constructed' distinctions have, according to identity politics, facilitated terrible atrocities in the past. Therefore, anyone seeking to maintain these distinctions is seen as 'perpetuating violence' and can be mercilessly censored.

# Pushback against identity politics

"The thing we used to be aspiring to was what Dr Martin Luther King described as judging people by the content of their character... But identity politicking, putting our society into atomized groups which you can then weaponize against each other, does exactly the opposite of that. It says the most important things are your characteristics, and if that's the case then we are all prisoners of how we were born."<sup>14</sup> DOUGLAS MURRAY, THE MADNESS OF CROWDS

#### **Sir Roger Scruton**

The late conservative thinker Roger Scruton argued that identity politics insists that "everything relevant to our sense of self lies within our power, so that nothing can be imposed on us without our consent... sex has been re-written as gender, and gender defined as a social construct. In this way, hardware becomes software, and fate becomes choice."<sup>15</sup>



#### Jordan Peterson

Canadian psychologist Professor Jordan Peterson says identity politics forces groups into *"warfare"* with each other. *"I think that's a route to certain disaster. I think it's a degeneration into tribalism, and that we will seriously pay for it.*<sup>#16</sup> If everyone buys into identity politics *"it will bring down our civilisation if we pursue it".*<sup>17</sup>



#### Mark Lilla

Mark Lilla, a socially liberal academic, argues that successful politics must be "centripetal" and "encourage factions and interests to come together to work out common goals". Identity politics does the opposite. It is "centrifugal, encouraging splits into smaller and smaller factions obsessed with single issues".<sup>18</sup> This undermines social cohesion.



#### **David Starkey**

Historian David Starkey argues that notions such as *"privilege"* require the *"denigration"* of British history, undermining the foundations of Western society.<sup>19</sup>



#### **Lionel Shriver**

Author Lionel Shriver has opposed identity politics, describing it as a "single-minded obsession... an ugly way of thinking of both the self and of other people". It undermines the self by "encouraging people to embrace their own fragility and their own difficulties as the source of their very identity". And it fragments society, pitting people against one another in a "fundamentally adversarial" public discourse.<sup>20</sup>



## THE CHRISTIAN VIEW OF IDENTITY



The Bible answers questions about identity at the deepest level. Genesis tells us that we are made "in God's image"; uniquely valuable and with real dignity and responsibility (Genesis 1:26-27). So it is right for every individual to be honoured and respected as intrinsically precious, regardless of who they are.

However, Scripture also tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Sin alienates us from God, mars his image in us and damages our relationships with other people. Identity politics blames society's brokenness on oppression by the 'privileged'. However, Christians believe the fundamental issue is in *every* human heart, which has gone its own way. All stand guilty and condemned before a just God.

The gospel message is that only through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross can we have peace with God, our sins forgiven and the restoration of God's image. So the only question of identity that ultimately matters is whether we are in Christ. If we are, then we are reconciled to God and no longer what we were. 1 Corinthians 6 lists those who are identified by their sin: the greedy, the thieves, the sexually immoral and so on. But then comes verse 11:

> "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."

Christians now live a life centred on Christ, as his ambassadors in a fallen world, urging people to be reconciled to God through repentance and faith.

## **FACING IDENTITY POLITICS**

Identity politics is damaging the fabric of our society. It makes people intensely individualistic and unconcerned about what is good for all. Public debate is often poisoned and characterised by attempts to silence people or seek retribution. This is bad news for everyone, including

those who might seem to benefit in the short term. Christians must model a better way, being salt and light



in how we engage with contentious issues and love our neighbour. What we say is of course vital, as we seek to promote our Creator's design as the best way for all his image-bearers to live. But how we sav it and how we treat those who oppose us is also crucial. Like Christ, we must be full of

grace and truth. But we must also have great courage. Attempts to silence us are inevitable because a sinful world does not accept biblical truth. We will be misunderstood and misrepresented (Matthew 5:10-12). but Christians seek the good of all, not just some – unlike identity politics.

#### REFERENCES

christian.org.uk/Identitypoliticsbrief-ref



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