

The right's culture war is no longer a sideshow to our politics – it is our politics

Conservatives are winning elections by inventing threats to 'our culture'



'Much like Biden's secret plot to set criminals loose, the Proms scandal isn't true: there was no demand that the songs be dropped.' Photograph: Guy Bell/PA

By Nesrine Malik
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It is hard to pick out one highlight from last week's bizarre Republican national convention. But the Florida Congressman Matt Gaetz managed to distil into one chilling sentence the essence of rightwing politics today. Joe Biden, Gaetz explained, "would empty the prisons, lock you in your homes, and invite MS-13 to live next door. And the defunded police aren't on their way."

There's a wish for Britain to be a precious damsel in distress rather than a country impoverished by misrule

The only mercy in this grotesque US election – which will only get uglier – is that the fearmongering is totally naked. It's not about "making America great again" again, or the plight of the little guy. It is about order. The threats to order are always present, and always held at bay, just barely, by conservative leaders valiantly fighting the imminent deluge. This authoritarian populist strategy is founded on an essential fiction: the pretence of powerlessness among politicians, and their voters, who are very much in charge. The weak and the marginalised, and especially their fragile movements for racial and economic equality, are cast as a terrifying force, influential and deeply embedded – a shadow regime that will bloom into tyranny the instant the Democrats are elected.

In Britain, we watch this American political horror from behind our fingers, with the bewildered bemusement of a country far from this madness. But we are there too. The right in the UK now is following the same playbook. The approach is just as calculated, but the presentation is slightly less crude, and therefore more difficult to challenge.

Over here, fearmongering is altogether more refined. Instead of hyped-up nonsense about emptying prisons and killer migrant gangs, there are subtle and insidious threats to British values. Consider the latest attack on our national pride: thinly sourced reports that *Rule, Britannia!* and *Land of Hope and Glory* might be axed from “BBC’s ‘Black Lives Matter Proms’”. Much like Biden’s secret plot to set criminals loose, the Proms scandal isn’t true: there was no demand that the songs be dropped. There will be an orchestral version online this year because there’s a pandemic on, and there will be no audience to sing along. A vocal version is “fully expected to return next year”.

This dubious tale wasn’t invented by a Fox News-style propaganda network: it was carried by the *Sunday Times* and the *Times* and followed up by all the other papers. But it wasn’t an innocent misunderstanding: it was the result of a desire to exaggerate the threat to “our culture” from the unnamed vandals set on destroying it.

Once it was out there, the whole of the British media ran with the story. Even the BBC itself rang to ask me to come on for a debate on “the importance of our traditions” – amplifying fears and threats even as its own news site hosted a report explaining that the decision was pandemic-related, and nothing to do with subverting tradition.

There’s nothing new about these concoctions. Two years ago, the *Daily Telegraph* frightened its readers with a front page falsely reporting that Cambridge was being “forced to drop white authors” by a single black student – the publication of whose picture on the front page brought her abuse and harassment, even as the newspaper soon retracted its story. But there is something new and significant about the fake Proms scandal. It is a fabrication in plain sight, a trick performed by lazy magicians who don’t bother with sleight of hand because they know how badly the audience wants to believe the illusion.

Before long, the story was given the imprimatur of truth by the prime minister – who supposedly defied the restraint of his own minders to speak out against the dangerous “wetness” stalking the land. By the end of the week, parts of the public had been whipped into a frenzy, as seen in several polls helpfully asking how they felt about the BBC’s craven surrender to rampant wokeness. *Land of Hope and Glory* raced up the charts as a rebuke to the imaginary censors.

The reason that these made-up stories preoccupy journalists, politicians and the public is that culture-war skirmishes are no longer a sideshow to our politics – they *are* the politics. They are how rightwing electoral prospects are now advanced; not through policies or promises of a better life, but by fostering a sense of threat, a fantasy that something profoundly pure and British is constantly at risk of extinction. What our most successful politicians understand is the insatiable public appetite for these falsehoods, the wish for these lies to be true – for Britain to be a precious damsel in distress rather than a battered country impoverished by the misrule of its governing class.

For all the clear appetite and motivation for concocting and believing these lies, we are terrible at defending against them. Either we accept their premise, and start debating the pros and cons of cancelling the lyrics, or we think it’s clever to rise above them and not give the right the culture war that it wants. Either way we fall into the trap of

promoting fake culture-war stories by engaging in them, or allowing them to grow unchallenged because there is more serious real politics to attend to. This *is* the serious real politics. It is winning elections. It is fostering a siege mentality that can be easily converted, as Gaetz did, into fear of the other lot getting in and establishing an anarchic regime that vandalises history, opens the borders and embraces the thugs and vandals of Black Lives Matter.

The main challenge that faces any progressive forces over the next few years isn't in convincing the electorate of the mendacity or incompetence of the Conservative party, it's exposing the vast complex of lies that it is being sold every day, and those who sell them. We can either do that, or we can continue to stumble, out of credulity or cowardice, into culture-war traps as they pave the way to the next rightwing election victory.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist