TALKING POINT

John Launer: Proud to be woke

John Launer GP educator and writer

When I was at school in the 1960s, it was common for teachers to beat children. At my primary school I saw a teacher beating a child on his legs with a handful of rulers in front of the whole class. The boy must have been about 7. At my secondary school it was done in private, with a cane. Thinking back on the boys who were usually punished, it’s easy to deduce that most would have been from troubled backgrounds, the kind of children whom paediatricians and child psychologists would now recognise as being affected by adverse childhood experiences.

At that time abortion was illegal, as was consensual sex between men. No woman would have dared go to an NHS doctor to ask for an unwanted pregnancy to be terminated. She would have proceeded with the pregnancy against her will, perhaps to give the baby up for adoption, or sought an illegal termination from a private abortion provider, putting her health and life at risk. A man who sought help because of the distress caused by his feelings of attraction towards other men, in a society that regarded this as pathological, might have been referred for aversion therapy with electric shocks, or oestrogen treatment to reduce his libido.

Men who were discovered having sex with each other were imprisoned.

Within wider society, capital punishment still existed. The last hanging in Britain was in 1964. Some people who were hanged were later found to have been wrongfully convicted. Overt racism was widely accepted. People letting out rooms in London openly stipulated that “no Blacks or Irish” should apply. Elite clubs, including golf clubs, excluded Jews. When people with black or brown skin were abused at work, there was no legal means of redress.

If today’s medical students or doctors early in their careers are surprised that some of their teachers were brought up in that world, it’s a tribute to the campaigners who made it almost unimaginable that those barbarities might ever return. Almost unimaginable—but not entirely. In the United States, the Supreme Court’s decision to overturn the constitutional right to an abortion is a chilling alarm signal. People who would like to turn the clock back to the mid-20th century or beyond have not vanished. Nor have they lost the will to seize their moment.

One warning sign in Britain is the increasing use of the term “woke” to denigrate anyone who believes in further advancement of equality and human rights, such as by teaching history from the perspective of people who were enslaved or providing safe routes for asylum seekers. On the surface, the term is mocking. Underneath, it’s part of a wider movement to reverse the progress some of us have seen in our lifetimes.

If you hear someone being described as woke, take a closer look at the argument or idea that someone else is trying to dismiss. And if you’re accused of being woke yourself, wear it as a badge of pride.

Competing interests: None.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.
