# Why Britain’s social liberalism contrasts with rising political nationalism



In 1987, the British soap opera EastEnders featured its first gay kiss, a mild peck on the forehead, which triggered a furious backlash and calls for censorship at the time. This year, as the show celebrates its 40th anniversary, such a scene would scarcely raise an eyebrow among UK viewers. Over the past four decades, Britain has witnessed extraordinary changes in social attitudes, not only regarding LGBT issues but also on a wide array of cultural questions including mental health, international aid, and environmental concerns.

This evolution in social outlook presents a paradox within British politics. Public opinion has shifted towards increased social liberalism, yet political trends suggest a move in the opposite direction. Reform UK, a party representing a hard-Right, nativist agenda, often polls at around 25%, a level far exceeding the popularity of similar parties four decades ago. Additionally, movements such as Blue Labour have emerged, which express varying degrees of sympathy towards figures like Donald Trump and JD Vance.

This contrast—manifested in the so-called “EastEnders paradox”—sees millions of viewers regularly engaging with a socially diverse and liberal soap opera on BBC One, only to subsequently cast votes for political parties that promote nationalist and socially conservative policies. This scenario raises questions about the dynamics between popular culture and political behaviour in the UK.

Data from various social surveys and research, including the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA), highlight the trajectory of liberalisation in British society over the last two decades. For instance, support for same-sex relationships doubled between 2000 and 2022, and backing for abortion rights increased by 22 percentage points since 1998. Concern for environmental issues has almost doubled since 2010, and racial attitudes have shifted significantly, with fewer people agreeing that one must be white to be British, and increased acceptance of foreigners living nearby becoming the norm. Conversely, support for the death penalty has declined sharply.

Despite this broad social liberalisation, the issue of immigration reflects a complex change. The BSA’s 2024 report reveals substantial growth in the proportion of Britons who view immigration as economically beneficial (rising from 17% in 2002 to 40% in 2024) and culturally enriching (increasing from 33% to 43%). Notably, the opposition to immigration based on race has diminished with similar falls in disapproval of white and non-white inward migration. However, support for immigration has somewhat declined since the onset of the cost-of-living crisis, though it remains significantly higher than in previous generations.

The report further suggests that the contemporary immigration debate is not solely driven by nativist sentiments but is complicated by concerns about pressures on public services and frustrations related to issues like illegal small boat crossings. Polling expert Peter Kellner explains that many UK voters hold positive views of immigrants as individuals but are more apprehensive about broader immigration policies.

One explanation for the political shift towards the Right despite greater social liberalism involves the concept of “two-speed liberalisation,” as outlined by Professor Rob Ford, a co-author of the BSA report. This theory posits that while the country as a whole is becoming more liberal, attitudes are changing at different rates across generations, education levels, and political affiliations. For example, younger generations, such as Millennials, have transitioned towards liberal attitudes more quickly than older cohorts. Similarly, those with university degrees have demonstrated faster acceptance of immigration and other liberal values compared to those without formal qualifications.

This divergence creates social and political tensions, often framed as culture wars, with accusations of intolerance exchanged between segments of the population moving at incompatible paces. The experience of regional inequality, the impact of educational attainment, and the amplification of differences by social media have all contributed to these divisions.

Despite the apparent political rightward drift, the British electorate as a whole holds relatively moderate views. The challenge, according to analysts, is not about confronting populist anti-migrant sentiments with opposing extremes but about managing the rate and nature of social change through leadership and policies that foster public trust and unity.

Addressing contentious issues such as freedom of speech, equality, and immigration requires nuanced solutions. Specifically on immigration, a proposed middle ground involves combining higher levels of migration in key sectors and a more humane asylum system with enhanced controls, such as the introduction of ID cards to curb illegal work. This reflects public concern for control over immigration rather than merely reducing immigrant numbers.

Such approaches necessitate compromise from both faster and slower liberalisers to find common ground that serves national interests. This would facilitate a more constructive dialogue about social issues and potentially ease the political tensions arising from differing paces of social change.

The discussion of social liberalisation and political shifts in Britain highlights the complexity of public opinion, illustrating how cultural acceptance and political preferences can coexist amid varying rates of change across different social groups. The British Social Attitudes survey and other research underscore this intricate landscape, challenging simplistic interpretations of the political climate. The evolving nature of British society calls for attention to these nuances in formulating policies and political strategies.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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