The Guardian | By Anne McElvoy | July 26, 2023

Anne McElvoy is executive editor of Politico.

I can't solve Brexit or the culture wars – but I've learned to see the other side of even the most polarised debates

Vehemently disagreeing comes naturally to many of us, and the fraught times we live in often make it seem easier to find divisions than bridging points. But as noble as it is to stand up for our beliefs, there's also a wearing quality in being defined by our disagreements. From Brexit to the endless culture wars, these spats and blame games are easier to start than to end.

Like a lot of columnists, I have been booked for many pro-and-con debates on the "classic" dividing lines over the past decade. So, since 2018, I have taken a break from the weekly wrangles over rights and wrongs to do something a bit different on the summer airwaves.

Across the Red Line on BBC Radio 4 came about because myself and the show's producer, Phil Tinline, felt that many public formats of debate were frustrating, even stultifying. It was easier to get locked in your own worldview and seek a volley of ammunition to fire at opponents than to get to the reasons why reasonable people can end up in a bubble of the like-minded. A joke about needing conflict resolution experts sparked the idea of a show that would focus on why people hold the views they do, and what it might feel like to have convictions very different from our own.

We would ask participants who are often defined by what they stand for or against to be guided by our experts in "active listening" techniques – I am blessed with two wonderful conflict resolution practitioners, Gabrielle Rifkind and Louisa Weinstein – in order to explore the roots of the other side's convictions, and then (the fun part) swap positions to express the opposing view.

This season, we've covered immigration, with two speakers who both have migrant family backgrounds but diverging views on how much of it is good for Britain. Previously, we've abolished (or not) the monarchy and tussled about taxation. And we've also tried to get to the root of subtler themes that shape our time – […] is it a blessing or curse to seek fame?

I remember in our first episode, Hugh Muir (now the executive editor of the Guardian's Opinion section) and Charles Moore, the high Tory commentator and former editor at the Telegraph, addressed whether it is OK to be wary of those from different backgrounds. Muir used to work at the Telegraph and he said Charles really hadn't realized what it was like for a young black man to work in an all-white newsroom, or to venture out into un-diverse villages for reporting assignments.

The breakthrough for me was hearing Moore reflect, after the role-swapping part, that if he had had Muir's experiences, he would think differently on some things: a simple recognition, but one that doesn't always come about automatically. It's not about a "mea culpa" so much as an "I see better where you are coming from". Watching two very convinced people trying out each other's way of thinking puts a different lens on why we clash and how we can still communicate. A listener wrote that she liked the sense of people "working hard at their disagreements".

I remember Polly Toynbee worrying about the part where we ask the participants to express the view of the other person. She worried that if someone switched on halfway through the show on assisted dying when she was attacking the practice, she might be mistaken for her opponent. But taking the other side is a key method in conflict resolution – and very hard to do well. Listening back to parish councillor Jackie Weaver, of lockdown Zoom fame, swapping sides to argue the boomer case against Conservative Home's Henry Hill on the topic of boomers v millennials, the airwaves crackled.

Has the format worked its magic on me? For sure. I hear more of the areas now in debates where there could be commonality or understanding. I recognise better the "cliff edge" points of our

arguments – where we know we are on crumbling ground and prefer not to interrogate our flaws or defaults. And the way formative experiences or moments in our life stories have a long tail in forming opinions we might think of as strictly rational. And listening, it turns out, is a muscle we need to exercise if it isn't just going to be about waiting for your own chance to speak.

In our episode this week, we had Peter Tatchell defending disruptive protest as a veteran of the clashes over apartheid and clause 28. He was talking to Bruce Anderson, who thinks that his own time as a firebrand protester in Northern Ireland created more strife than it resolved. They didn't always see eye to eye. But my sense is that they left with a better idea of why someone opposed to their opinion feels so strongly. That's a small leap forwards.

'I hear more of the areas now in debates where there could be commonality or understanding.' The anti-Brexit protester Steve Bray argues with a Brexit supporter in 2021. Photograph: Avpics/Alamy

Opinion | *The Washington Post* | By the Editorial Board | January 3, 2024

The resignation of Harvard's president is a chance for schools to learn

In a less turbulent time, the ouster under pressure of an Ivy League college president would have been a major story. In the current political and cultural maelstrom, the resignation of Harvard President Claudine Gay feels even bigger than that. The proximate cause of Ms. Gay's downfall appears to have been mounting academic plagiarism allegations against her. The deeper causes, though, lie in the clash between elite colleges, whose students and faculty lean sharply left, and a broader society in which populist conservatism is increasingly making its presence felt.

Like last month's resignation of Ms. Gay's counterpart Liz Magill at the University of Pennsylvania, her departure is nothing to celebrate. The fact that it reflects outside political pressure could set a dangerous precedent. The racist messages and threats sent Ms. Gay's way are repugnant. Nevertheless, Harvard and other leading institutions of higher education would do well to reflect on how they themselves contributed to this debacle and how they can do better in the future.

Harvard's failing, and that of its peer institutions, can be summarized in a single word: inconsistency. Ms. Gay assumed leadership of Harvard in a post-George Floyd climate of racial reckoning as its first Black president. A champion of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, she made racial justice on campus a cornerstone of her efforts at Harvard. The institution's leaders spoke clearly and passionately against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and police abuse after Floyd's death, but when Hamas launched its horrific Oct. 7 massacre of Jews and others in Israel, Ms. Gay (and other university presidents) did not immediately and forcefully condemn it. To outraged alumni and other critics, Harvard had no good explanation.

Ms. Gay modified her position and, sincerely, professed her rejection of terrorism and antisemitism, only to find herself embroiled in another political mess when she and Ms. Magill, at a Republican-led congressional hearing, responded with bloodless, lawyerly language to questions about whether an on-campus call for genocide against Jews would violate their rules against bullying and harassment. The hearing, of course, was a political trap laid by Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-N.Y.), and — legally speaking — the answer Ms. Gay gave was a correct exposition of free-speech doctrine. A call for genocide against Jews, though definitely odious, might be permissible political speech, depending on when and how it was uttered. The problem, again, was inconsistency: Recent history confirms that universities know how to define and police offensive speech when they wish to, often when it offends prevailing progressive sentiment. Why seem to balk at an example of antisemitic speech?

The lesson for Harvard and for all universities is that it was a mistake to create the expectation that university presidents must weigh in on the great issues of the day. If administrators, as a matter of principle, avoided pandering to left-wing activists on campus they would be on firmer ground resisting activist, right-wing or otherwise, voices off it. And their claims to respect all speech — within uniformly applied time, manner and place limitations — would have more credibility.

The business of a great university is not to take sides in America's culture wars. In a previous editorial, we cited the University of Chicago as a bastion of consistent standards and open inquiry. In 1967, Chicago put forward Kalven principles, which outlined an ideal of the university as the venue for free, unencumbered — and, yes, at times offensive — debate and deliberation. When universities appear to take a "collective position," they undermine this purpose, signaling to students and faculty that there is only one right way to think.

Which brings us to academic plagiarism, the issue that ultimately brought down Ms. Gay. There is legitimate debate as to whether her failure to cite various passages from the work of other scholars was a relative foot fault or serious academic misconduct, as the conservative critics who seized upon this as a proxy for their political disagreements with Ms. Gay and Harvard maintained. Still, consistency required that Ms. Gay be held to the same standard as students over whom she presides. Harvard's initial response, though, was to circle the wagons. Through a hard-charging law firm, Clare Locke, it threatened a newspaper, the New York Post, with a lawsuit if it published some of the charges against Ms. Gay, asserting they were false even though the university had not yet investigated them.

For all the politically motivated criticism directed at Harvard and other leading universities, they remain exemplars of scientific and intellectual merit and educational excellence. But they are not perfect and they are not, in this case, entirely blameless. For the sake of their stature, actual and perceived, these schools will have to take this as an opportunity to learn.

NPR | By Becky Harlan | January 29, 2024

A secret shelf of banned books thrives in a Texas school, under the nose of censors

In the far, far suburbs of Houston, Texas, three teenagers are talking at a coffee shop about a clandestine bookshelf in their public school classroom. It's filled with books that have been challenged or banned.

"Some of the books that I've read are books like *Hood Feminism*, *The Poet X*, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*," says one of the girls. She's a 17-year-old senior with round glasses and long braids. The books, she says, sparked her feminist consciousness. "I just see, especially in my community, a lot of women being talked down upon and those books [were] really nice to read."

These students live in a state that has banned more books than nearly any other, according to PEN America. The Texas State Board of Education passed a policy in late 2023 prohibiting what it calls "sexually explicit, pervasively vulgar or educationally unsuitable books in public schools." Over the past two years, Texas teachers have lost jobs or been pressured to resign after making challenged books available to students.

The teacher who created this bookshelf could become a target for far right-wing groups. That's why NPR is not naming her, nor her students.

"We don't want to jeopardize our teacher in any way, or the bookshelf," another teenager explains. Until recently, he says, he was not naturally inclined toward reading. But the secret bookshelf opened a world of characters and situations he immediately related to. "Just to see Latinos, like LGBTQ," he says. "That's not something you really see in our community, or it's not very well represented at all."

The secret bookshelf began in late 2021, when then-state Rep. Matt Krause sent public schools a list of 850 books he wanted banned from schools. They might, he said, "make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex."

That made this teacher furious. "The books that make you uncomfortable are the books that make you think," she told NPR. "Isn't that what school is supposed to do? It's supposed to make you think?"

She swung into action, calling friends to support a bookshelf that would include all of the books Krause wanted banned. Then she enlisted a student to put it together. [...]

NPR repeatedly reached out to former Texas lawmaker Matt Krause for comment and got no response. He is currently running for county commissioner in the Fort Worth area.

The chief of communications for the public school district thanked NPR for "highlighting this very important topic," but said, "we're going to pass on this opportunity," when asked to comment on how administrators are implementing policies around books that have been challenged.

"We've been seeing a climate of fear — and a variety of self-censorship — going on by school leaders or librarians who do not understand the implications of the law or are fearful for their jobs," said Carolyn Foote. She's a retired English teacher and librarian who co-created the activist group Texas FReadom Fighters.

Kasey Meehan of the free speech advocacy group PEN America says she's watched things in Texas escalate. She points to a teacher fired last year for sharing a graphic novel with her students that showed Anne Frank having a romantic daydream about another girl. Another teacher featured on an NBC podcast left her job under pressure after making literature available to students featuring a positive transgender character.

"Parents are taking books from schools and bringing them to police or sheriff offices and accusing librarians and educators of providing sexually explicit material to students," Meehan says.

"It does make me nervous," admitted the Houston teacher with the secret bookshelf. "I mean, this is absolutely silly that I am not free to talk about books without giving my name and worrying about repercussions."

At some point, she hopes, it will no longer have to be a secret.

The Guardian | Luke Winkie | Thu 23 Dec 2021

US conservative parents push for book bans – and unintentionally make reading cool again

Moms and dads stormed into the Spotsylvania county town hall, in Virginia, in early November, hell-bent on purging all "objectionable" books from the scholastic jurisdiction. **Novels containing any commentary about race, sexuality and sexual content were put under the microscope, as a fresh reactionary panic takes aim at the stacks in high school libraries**. "Results for gay, 172. Results for *hetero*sexual, two," said Christina Burris, one of the attending parents, who used the district's literature search function to make her point. The board relented, voting 6-0 to enact a liquidation.

One of the books targeted by name was 33 Snowfish, an acclaimed 2003 novel concerning a trio of runaway teens and all sorts of sordid, Kids-ish behavior. **The concerned parents of northern Virginia believed that heady themes of poverty, addiction and abuse have no place in the sanctums of learning, and therefore, the book needed to go.**

When Paul Cymrot heard about the meeting, he tracked down as many copies of 33 Snowfish as he could find. He soon discovered, ironically, that book was never really in the school library. 33 Snowfish is barely in print, and Cymrot tells me that it was an ebook version, lingering in some dusty corner of the school library servers, which sparked the initial animus.

The moral militancy immediately backfired, because Cymrot knows a good business opportunity when he sees one. He's owned the Spotsylvania-area Riverby Books for 25 years, and possesses a shrewd nose for the ebbs and flows of the publishing market. One bookselling truth remains eternally undefeated, explains Cymrot. **When a censorious zeitgeist swallows up a novel, a lot of people will want to buy it.**

"It was not easy to find a box full of 33 Snowfish, but we did," he continues. "We sold all that we bought, and we kept a couple as loaners because we wanted to make sure any students in the community could see what the fuss was about. There will always be some around."

It's now easier than ever to read 33 Snowfish in Spotsylvania county, subverting the rightwing siege on the supposed woke conspiracy infecting school libraries.

New ominous headlines about book bannings trickle in all the time. Just this month, Texas state representative Matt Krause pushed for the ousting of 850 books, including classics by Alan Moore and Margaret Atwood, from the public curriculum. A few days earlier, Parents in Kansas City stormed school conventions because they fear that their children might start internalizing the wisdom of Alison Bechdel or Angie Thomas. Two members of the board at the Spotsylvania meeting floated the idea of literally *burning* the offending titles, which would be an assault on both our precious norms and our precious subtext.

As always, the impetus of the mania is simple, stupid and cynical. The Republican party has made a concerted effort to bring outré philosophic principles like critical race theory to the heart of our politics, which is why the Virginia governor-elect, Glenn Youngkin, spent much of his time on the campaign trail griping about Toni Morrison's Beloved. Parents took the bait, and overnight high school librarians – those brazen extremists pushing their anti-American agendas by cataloging Pulitzer winners from 1987 – were put in the crosshairs.

These books are rarely inflammatory or obscene; instead, they simply contain narratives about race, gender and inequality that chafe against prescribed American ideology. That's more than enough for an emboldened conservative movement.

But there is no evidence that the wave of book bans are actually accomplishing their intended ambition. If anything they've achieved the opposite effect. Sales of Beloved increased after Youngkin transformed Morrison into a partisan figure, and Jerry Craft, an author and artist who found himself on the Krause list for his 2019 graphic novel New Kid, has spoken at length about how legislative suppression is an unlikely boon for his career. "What has happened is so many places have sold so many copies because now people want to see what all the hubbub is," he said, in an interview with the Houston Chronicle. "They're almost disappointed because there's no big thing that they were looking for."

In 2021, with countless different merchants all manacled together by an intercontinental supply chain, proscribing a novel is almost entirely ceremonial – more of a whinging fit than a genuine political project. **The Nazis burned thousands of books after seizing Berlin in 1933. Today, if a constable comes looking to repossess your literature, a replacement copy can be delivered to your mailbox the next morning.**

In fact, the booksellers I spoke to for this story all seemed eager to take on the government's injunction as a spiritual challenge – almost like a test of their moral fortitude. Mark Haber, operations manager at Houston's Brazos Bookstore, tells me his staff put up a display featuring a selection of the books evaporating from Texas school libraries. (Beloved and Michelle Zauner's Crying in H-Mart are performing very well.) "We had a drive where people could buy a banned book as a donation for a free library somewhere in the city," says Haber. "The bannings feel so organized. They aren't targeting a specific book, they're targeting 'books' in general."

Brazos, of course, is part of Houston's liberal enclave. There is a self-selection bias in his sales figures and customer clientele, which Haber happily admits. "It's definitely a political stance," he says. "We have customers who've maybe already read the book, and just want to buy it again."

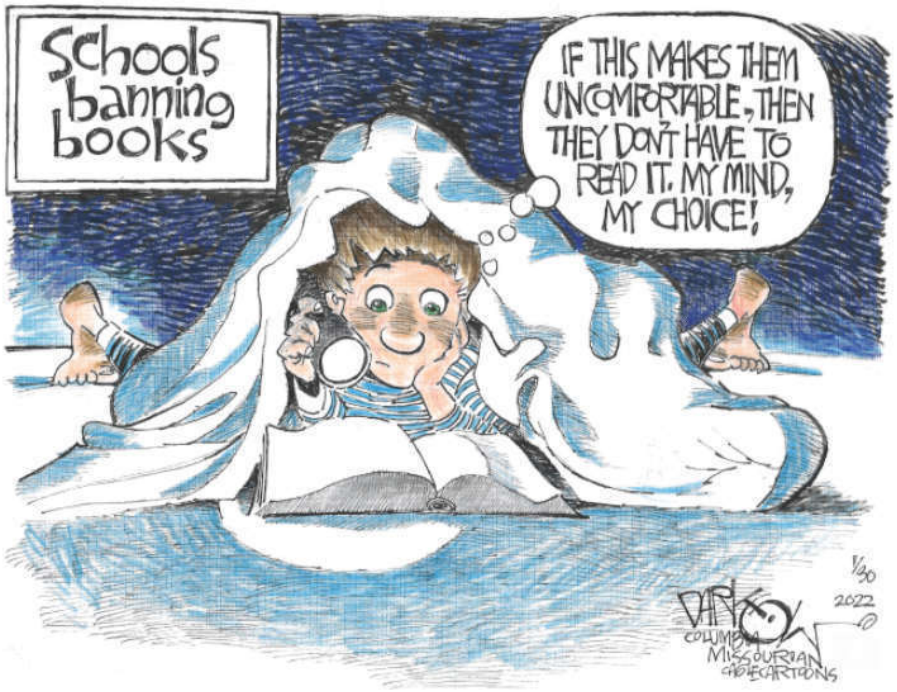
In fact, Cymrot tells me that he thinks that the book-ban sales bump is truly a bipartisan phenomenon. He notices a surge regardless of what party is relitigating the library. Earlier this year, when six of Dr. Seuss' books left circulation due to some offensive caricatures in the pages, Riverby thrived once again. "These paperbacks in our basement suddenly became collectibles," he says.

At the very least, the censorship campaigns may encourage kids to read more. I like the idea of enterprising teens wielding the Krause agenda like a summer reading list, checking off every title, one by one, until they've firmly opened their third eye.

One of the most heartening stories that surfaced from the hysteria occurred in York county, Pennsylvania, where local ordinances forbade teachers from using a swath of texts in their lesson plans last November. (The taxonomy was bizarre. Biographies of Aretha Franklin, Malala Yousafzai and Eleanor Roosevelt were put on ice.) **High schoolers around the community roused to action – staging campus protests, canvassing the local papers and eventually winning a reversal of the policy in September.**

Today, the confluence of students and teachers who overturned the ban are known as the Panthers Anti-Racist Union, named after the mascot of Central York high school. The group aims to continue their social justice advocacy into the future, which could soon result in much bolder action than the mealy proclivities of the local school board.

"I went through the list of the banned books and I thought they sounded great. My mom had a ton of them, I got others from random people," says Olivia Pituch, another member of the union. "It's funny, the ban made me more curious to see what they were about."



BANNING BOOKS

BY JOHN DARKOW, COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN