The Debating Group

A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

"THE ANTI-WOKE AGENDA IS FUELLING CREATIVITY"

On October 29th, 2024, The Debating Group met at the House of Commons with the debate being chaired by Baroness Sater and sponsored by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising.

Proposing the motion, **Asad Dhunna, Founder & Chief Executive Officer of The Unmistakables,** began by defining woke as being well-informed, standing up to racial and social injustice, as well as doing good by minority groups. The term was coined in a 1938 Lead Belly song encouraging people to stay woke to the injustices faced by minority groups.

Dhunna saw the anti-woke movement as a reaction to a recent overemphasis on political correctness. The anti-woke movement wants traditional values and uses free speech, empire, single-sex spaces and institutions as battlegrounds for their power struggle in preventing changes they do not agree with. Dhunna argued that moneyed men and the media were behind the movement, citing deSantis, Musk, Trump, Sunak, *The Telegraph* and the Mail Online as examples of this.

He explained that around 2015, Donald Trump had used society 'becoming a bit woke' as a platform to gain popularity and that the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement saw many people decide to take a stand on social justice issues. Since then, there have been clumsy attempts to try and figure out how to embed things like anti-racism and equality into organisations and big business. Going into 2025, Dhunna felt that we could harness creativity to take on the anti-woke movement.

Dhunna argued that by 2024 being woke had lost its teeth and become confused. But that in reacting to anti-wokeism, we are seeing creative advertising really hitting the mark on what people want, such as Martine McCutcheon singing 'Ooh Arr, Just a Little Bit' for Lidl. Because people want to outsmart the anti-woke movement, we have art, plays, TV and even TikTok creators telling us to be more mindful.

Dhunna cited anti-woke anger at people working from home because 1 in 10 took a nap whilst there, despite the probability that this actually made them more productive. He cited brands distancing themselves from Pride because of worries over the risk of anti-woke pushback. He cited the purpose-washing at Cannes Lions as well as the anti-woke movement saying that we need to get sharper and for advertising to balance profit with purpose. For Dhunna, that was a good thing, fuelling us to find new creative roots.

Nor was it just the young turning against anti-wokeism, it was also parents who want better futures for their children. He suggested that the demographic profile of woke movements like Extinction Rebellion was the generation that wants to leave behind a better planet. Without the anti-woke movement, such people would not be active or finding creative solutions to problems.

Dhunna concluded with a call to arms – to get creative in driving out the anti-woke movement that wants us to go back to the past. For this, we need new creative solutions to ensure we move forwards

and not backwards.

Opposing the motion, **Shelina Janmohamed, Director of Consumer Equality at Ogilvy UK,** agreed that Lead Belly's song called for us to be literally awake, mindful and observant of how injustice and inequality are pervasive. Taking us back to the summer of 2020, watching the scenes of George Floyd's murder and BLM moved many to act - to make a change as a result of the inequality we witnessed. At that moment, the majority was woke. And that was when the anti-woke agenda began, because some people just don't like change.

Coming to the first of three points, Janmohamed proposed that the anti-woke movement itself lacks creativity; unable even to come up with a great name, they're just anti. She noted the lack of a proper definition for anti-woke but suggested that if woke was being alert to injustice and inequality, then anti-woke was being asleep to it. How is anyone who is asleep going to fuel creativity?

Janmohamed went on to imagine how the anti-woke movement might choose to describe itself, perhaps through claiming to value tradition and cultural norms, preserve society and defend free speech. In other words, wanting things to stay the same - which is itself an idea built on having no creative ideas. Here, she cited a laughably uncreative speech by Florida Governor, Ron deSantis, a key figure in the anti-woke movement. She continued, arguing that anti-woke is not even creatively a new idea, just a lazy regurgitation of past failed movements including that of 'political correctness gone mad' or, looking further back, opposition to women's suffrage. Janmohamed could personally testify to the lack of creativity from those advancing an anti-woke agenda with the ethnic stereotyping thrown at her lacking in originality. This included 'You don't speak English,' while she was literally talking to them in English. The same applies to racism, misogyny and other characteristics of the anti-woke movement. Something so devoid of creativity, cannot be a fuel for creativity, she asserted.

Turning to her second argument, she suggested that the methods of the anti-woke agenda stifle both creativity and the conditions necessary for it to come about. To maintain the status quo the anti-woke agenda devalues marginalised groups who seek equality by dehumanising them. They stopped people from making creative contributions and then claimed that they weren't contributing because they didn't have any creativity. Because creativity is a core component of being human, this dehumanizes them. She cited anti-woke language such as 'What did women ever invent?' or 'How many black Nobel Prize winners do you know?'. She countered this with reference to the thousands of immigrant women – including her own mother - making haute couture dresses when the UK fashion industry was at its height in the 1980s. Their creativity was denied them by a forerunner of the current anti-woke movement. How can a movement that rejects human creativity be claimed to fuel it?

Another method of the anti-woke movement is to polarise and create division that de facto reduces creativity. Janmohamed pointed to the pushback of the anti-woke movement on representation because the latter creates social change. They also pushed back against diversity because that is important in fuelling creativity. By suppressing all these voices, Janmohamed argued that the anti-woke claim of supporting freedom of speech was inherently oxymoronic.

Her final argument was that the anti-woke agenda sucked up energy, time and resources that could otherwise be used creatively. She drew a parallel with the idea that the function of racism is distraction, to keep you from your work. The anti-woke agenda does this, citing the summer riots that saw people barricaded at home, exhausted and fearful. That did not fuel creativity. We also spend time fighting anti-wokeism - pointing out that a hundred or so people had turned up that evening in Committee Room 14 to debate the false premise that the anti-woke agenda is good for creativity. Janmohamed concluded that, whatever our politics, the anti-woke agenda is not a net contributor to creativity.

Seconding for the proposal, **Lucy Barbor, Founder of We Are Masterplan,** clarified that while she was fundamentally against anti-woke, the movement did bring some creativity. She defined anti-woke as anybody using 'woke' as an insult, citing the interview by Owen Jones of somebody who had

suggested shooting immigrants. Although ludicrous, this was the very definition of anti-woke. But she challenged the assertion that anti-woke was devoid of an idea, suggesting that many would describe themselves as pro-America or pro-Britain. For them, anti-woke was not the absence of an idea but the summary of everything they held dear.

While Barbor could not align herself with this movement, it could still teach creative services some things it had forgotten. Referring to the 'golden age of purpose' that put a strapline on every campaign to say 'Look at us. We are doing good. Aren't we wonderful?' This approach had become too smug and confused - a meaningless strapline rather than demonstrative of business mission.

The anti-woke movement cut through the confusion by simply putting a slogan on a baseball cap and creating a catchy jingle. Barbor noted that Joe Rogan's podcast is the most successful and listened-to one in the US, so to say the anti-woke movement is asleep and devoid of ideas is to denigrate and dismiss large swathes of the population. While we should not tolerate racism and bigotry, we will not make progress by denying its existence. She felt you cannot ignore these people out of existence, instead we have to be more creative in countering them. We can't simply say 'we are right' and 'we want to do good.' We have to think more creatively about how we engage with such people.

Barbor then referenced binary media saying that we don't have to pick a side and stick to it forever. Advertising and media had made things worse by moving away from the notion of community to individualism, encouraging us only to worry about ourselves and those in our immediate purview. Marrying this to binary media, we assume everybody knows what they're thinking all the time, and everybody has black and white views on everything. However, this wasn't so - we have to address the reality that many people haven't made up their minds. For Barbor, the anti-woke movement had put an arm around those feeling shame about not knowing their opinion. She gave the example of a young boy looking at media and making a sexist joke. Where this should be an opportunity to engage and explain why it may be inappropriate, woke liberals tell them to be ashamed. This drives them into the 'comfortable' space of Andrew Tate who says, 'it's all right to think like that, here is a community for you.' If we don't become far more creative in engaging such individuals with open minds, the anti-woke movement will win.

Barbor concluded that creativity is absolutely fuelled if we: accept that the anti-woke movement exists; accept that grey areas have to be spoken to; and, find a better way of conversing with the people who form it. Working in communications, if we can't speak to people in the grey areas then we need to fuel better creativity. Speaking personally, Barbor said the anti-woke movement fuelled her creativity by sharpening it up and leaving her more determined to have the tools, techniques, thinking and messages to convince people that anti-woke is not the way forward.

Seconding for the opposition, **Dede Laurentino, Chief Creative Officer at Ogilvy UK,** summed up the previous argument as 'the size of your enemy and what they represent dictates the might of your creative powers'. He likened this to thanking a bully for the trauma they may have inflicted on you. Instead, Laurentino argued that creativity has always been about making leaps forward - with or without resistance - and that opposition was not essential for creativity to flourish. He cited Ogilvy's own Rory Sutherland, who has said that the opposite of a good idea is another good idea. Drawing on the history of artistic progress, Laurentino noted that creativity was not about fighting previous ideas but rather generating those which were better. Indeed, he believed that creativity is fuelled by the thrill of discovery. He explained that creativity can be harmonious or rebellious, it can disrupt a traditional form - such as Monty Python did for comedy - or it can take that form through to its zenith - as Charlie Chaplin had. As such, some creatives can be for change, while others seek to protect the status quo.

Here, Laurentino explained that in nineteenth century Paris the establishment had sought to protect the artistic status quo by rejecting the Impressionists and their radical ideas. This friction had driven the Impressionists to create their own salon. However, the Cubism that followed did not negate the Impressionists but had instead built on the ideas of the former.

Given this, why wasn't the anti-woke movement fuelling creativity? To begin with, Laurentino noted that there had been no surge in creativity due to anti-wokeism. The advertising industry had been prolific and great before the appearance of the anti-woke agenda. More importantly for Laurentino, was that the anti-woke movement was trying to suppress a crucial element of creativity - diversity. Diversity fuels creativity, with the more varied the creative voices across age, social class, race, gender, sexuality and faith, the richer the creative landscape. Anti-wokeism wanted to suppress this.

He hypothesised that if the anti-woke movement had suppressed the voices of women, there would have been no Virginia Wolf, no Adele and no Helen Mirren, for example. He expanded this thought to imagine the impact if the anti-woke movement could suppress the contribution of the black community to creativity or could silence the LGBTQI+ community. The creative losses would be monumental, he argued.

Turning to his native Brazil, Laurentino debunked the myth that under its 20-year dictatorship when everything was censored, people became more creative because they needed to find ways around the system by using codes and metaphors. Rather, when the dictatorship ended the same artists did even better and extended the breadth of their creative work. Creativity works better without oppression.

Laurentino told the story of a Brazilian singer exiled to London in the late 1960s. He had discovered reggae here and so became a Brazilian in England listening to Jamaican music – exemplifying diversity. The singer wrote a song about reggae and when he was allowed back into Brazil the censors asked him what reggae was because they had not heard of it. They assumed it was a drug or something sexual. For Laurentino, such negativity was the agenda of the anti-woke, anti-liberal, anti-diversity movement.

Finally, Laurentino disagreed with the notion that the anti-woke movement was serving to protect tradition, citing Gustav Mahler that ‘tradition is the transmission of the fire, not the worship of the ashes.’ He argued that in saying the anti-woke movement fuels creativity, we’re saying there is a positive side to it. However, as a creative, he could not agree with this. Laurentino concluded by saying that the anti-woke movement defends the continuation of social inequity and what defends the continuation of injustice is not worthy of praise.

The chair thanked the speakers and opened the debate to contributions from the floor.

Discussion from the Floor

Henry Oliver of Opinium, a researcher who measures creativity, believed the anti-woke movement was winning when it came to creativity. They created attention, donations and the illusion of censorship which generated votes. In turn, this created a reaction.

Anthony Gould, RTR Worldwide, was against the motion. While few present would be against the ultimate objectives of Extinction Rebellion, BLM and transgender ideology, the way they had gone about trying to achieve them had helped create the anti-woke agenda. He argued that with a more measured approach, they could probably have already won the arguments.

Steven Morrison didn’t feel the arguments advanced by the speakers related sufficiently to advertising, an industry currently in a creative slump largely due to the pursuit of social purpose campaigns around, for example, protecting the environment. This had suffocated creativity while creating a climate where people are afraid of everything – not least what to say. Instead, creativity needs a blank piece of paper where nothing is off limits and you can share thoughts fearlessly.

Will Lane from the Advertising Association agreed that creativity is about the freedom to think differently, a condition that flourishes best in a free, open and democratic society. Wokeism can create a climate of fear about saying the wrong thing and part of the anti-woke movement was around

standing up for the freedom of speech on which liberal democratic societies - the most creative type - are built.

The next speaker supported the motion but also stood for the woke movement because its origins are rooted in equality, equity and social justice. He suggested that a small group had taken over wokeism and the anti-woke movement was acting as a check that would bring the woke movement back around to its origins.

Sarina Brophy from IPSOS cited data that the fear of backlash when speaking out for minority or women's rights had increased 107% in five years. The anti-woke movement was stifling change, stressing that its answer to complex problems were very simple messages that were not serving to inspire creativity.

Nick Asbury, an author who had written against the use of purpose in advertising, felt that the debate had defined any opposition as anti-woke and therefore 'horrible'. He had heard no support for the anti-woke movement, even from the proposers, arguing that we can't have a fair debate if we all start from the standpoint of demonizing it.

Another speaker noted that use of the terms woke and anti-woke was very subjective and depended on how people perceived them. Similarly, creativity existed before woke and was also subjectively dependent on how people perceived things. Neither wokeism nor the anti-woke movement were sources of creativity.

The next speaker said that history has shown how movements like anti-woke have always existed, with critical discourse a key part of society even if we do not always find ourselves aligning with either side. Within this framework, creativity has and will continue to emerge because it is born out of inspiration and intention.

The next speaker was all for creativity. The speaker felt that the greatest example of creativity this year had been Linda Yaccarino trying to justify the video she as the Chief Executive Officer of X had posted about the Global Alliance of Responsible Media.

The next speaker had switched to be for the motion. She noted that while nobody had admitted during the debate so far to being anti-woke, the problems in society often come from people feeling alienated and we need to find ways to speak to these individuals and bring them on the journey with us rather than concluding that that they are simply uneducated.

The next speaker supported the proposition. Conflict fuels creativity because having something to argue against forces people to be more imaginative in their arguments for something. The anti-woke movement can fuel fear or creativity depending on people's responses: brands and individuals need to stick to their beliefs.

Kate Dale runs a campaign called This Girl Can and also a queer comedy club. She suggested that neither would exist without the anti-woke movement fuelling the need for such initiatives.

The next speaker was against the motion, arguing that the anti-woke movement pushed people to be either with us or against us. When people cannot speak their minds this suffocates creativity.

The next speaker lamented that they miss the boredom of the middle ground and therefore intended to abstain.

Will Nicholson of TVN complimented the IPA on organising a debate on such a sensitive issue. He acknowledged that responding to the anti-woke agenda has pushed the advertising and marketing industries to be more creative, but also noted that the room had not talked about the tick-boxing that

happens around purpose or people which happens in every meeting. He indicated that he planned to vote against the motion.

The next speaker argued that social purpose was not being rejected by anti-woke baddies, but by the people who buy products and those who make it. The opposite of woke is commercial purpose and the opposite of social purpose is commercial purpose. Advertising endeavours to achieve commercial purpose - it sells stuff.

Another speaker had switched to being for the motion, because while it might sit uncomfortably that anything anti-woke can be inspirational, realistically any idea generally inspires someone.

The final speaker noted that there were now many more creative ways to express your opinion, citing the use by Kamala Harris of TikTok – both Democrats and Republicans now competed to use such creative platforms.

The chair thanked the speakers from the floor and called for closing contributions from the opposer and the proposer.

Summing Up

For the opposition, **Shelina Janmohamed** had taken the contributions from the floor to heart. She agreed that there was confusion and people could feel lost, stressing the need for compassion towards those with different ideas and the need to reach out and have conversations with them. However, she also argued that the way the anti-woke movement operates is not good for creativity. When friction is removed, creativity goes into overdrive. She highlighted the disingenuousness of talking about equality or racism with somebody who does not know how to. She argued that there was an important distinction between someone who had a platform and was then cancelled versus somebody who never had a platform to start with because society had never given them that opportunity.

Talking specifically about advertising, she was excited about the amount of creativity that exists within the sector but how some of it was being undermined. Referring to a major consumer study she had led, Janmohamed stressed that to create growth we have to understand how to reach audiences we have not reached before. This was not about being woke, it simply made business sense. But it would not happen if businesses were made fearful or anxious about being too purposeful. There was scope both to solve inequality and make money! The anti-woke movement was not helping us to grow, it was stopping people from becoming more involved in society, unlocking their talent, achieving diversity and reaching out into those consumer audiences with compassion.

Janmohamed again challenged the notion that this resistance was helping us to grow. Regardless of politics, when somebody says a marketing communication is too woke by, for example, having a Muslim family appear in a Christmas advertisement, that is not fuelling creativity. Janmohamed concluded by saying that the industry needs to go back to basics - the more people you sell to in the most creative way, the better. And if we don't change fast enough or are stopped from changing, we won’t make money, we won’t drive equality and we won’t be letting creativity flourish.

For the proposition, **Asad Dhunna**, disagreed that we have devalued the marginalised, arguing that it was quite creative for the anti-woke movement to have recruited people like Kemi, Suella and Rishi into their ranks - people whose parents may have been subject to discrimination. He also challenged the notion that creativity is the reserve of the elite - people who are liberal or woke. Everyone can be creative.

He noted the challenges of working on Tesco's campaign for Ramadan, overcoming the fear and navigating an advertisement that much of the media did not appear to want to succeed. Noting that it is all about the ‘how’, he agreed that some movements like BLM had been clumsy in this regard. The anti-woke movement had been single-minded in their approach and capitalised on the fears of

everyday people who want to live good lives, but were unsure about what they could safely say or do. He asserted that the UK was not America, and that whatever your background or political leanings there was a lot of goodness in this country: people could read the Mail Online and still, deep down, want to do the right thing!

To mobilise change we have got to have the right conversations about what creativity is. It should not only be associated with moving forwards on social justice or racial equality - everyone can be creative whatever their purpose. With regards to advertising, we have to ask whether the creative ideas the industry is generating are relevant, suggesting that to be relevant you have to be culturally confident and able to understand the conversations that are happening – including Kamala Harris on TikTok.

Dhunna concluded by saying that a vote for the proposition was a vote for the idea that everyone can be creative. The question is what we use it for. We need to learn from what is happening now and ask ourselves where we want to be in five years? The conversation to date has been clunky and people are worried - we need to navigate our way through this because when we do it will fuel creativity.

Result
The motion was carried.