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## Cambridge Festival asks how Britain reached its current moment – and what comes next



Image: Boom, bust and blunders | credit: John McArthur on Unsplash

**From the UK economy and immigration to misinformation, race and the crisis of truth, this year's Cambridge Festival brings together leading thinkers and public figures to examine how politics and society arrived at a moment of profound uncertainty – and where we might go next.**

Across Britain and far beyond, public life feels caught in a moment of reckoning. Economic stagnation and insecurity sit alongside record migration and deep social division. Trust in institutions has been shaken by misinformation and the erosion of shared facts. Old ideas about race, power and belonging are resurfacing in new guises, while democratic systems struggle to adapt to a faster, more polarised world.

The **Cambridge Festival** returns from **16 March to 2 April**, bringing together leading thinkers, researchers, artists and public figures for one of the largest public knowledge festivals of its kind in the UK and the largest in the East of England. Spanning more than two weeks and hundreds of events, the festival offers a wide-ranging programme that connects academic research with the urgent political, economic and social questions shaping public life today.

Hosted across the University of Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin University and venues throughout the city, the festival invites audiences to engage with debates about democracy, inequality, truth, power and the future.

At the heart of the programme is a clear question: in an era shaped by upheaval, misinformation and profound inequality, how do we govern well, disagree productively and imagine a shared future?

### **The economic story behind the present moment**

The story begins with the economy. Few forces have shaped public life more decisively over the past generation, or more quietly, than economic policy. On 19 March, ***Boom, bust and blunders: The UK's economic journey and policy pitfalls, 1990–2024*** brings together Professor Jagjit S Chadha, former director of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, and the former home secretary Charles Clarke to reflect on more than three decades of economic decision-making.

From globalisation and financial deregulation to austerity and uneven growth, the discussion examines why the UK has struggled to raise living standards and reduce inequality, and how those failures have fed political discontent. With Chadha's vantage point at the centre of Westminster's economic analysis and Clarke's experience at the heart of government, the event offers a clear-eyed assessment of where policy has gone wrong and what lessons remain unlearned.

Economic insecurity, the speakers argue, has not simply reshaped household finances. It has transformed politics, trust and social cohesion.

### **Immigration, polarisation and the strain on civic life**

Few issues crystallise those pressures more sharply than immigration. Despite falling net migration, public concern remains high, and debate has grown increasingly brittle. On 18 March, ***Have we lost the ability to debate immigration – and what can education do about it?*** brings together refugee campaigners, political thinkers, academics and educators to ask whether polarisation over immigration reflects a deeper collapse in civic dialogue.

Rather than rehearsing familiar positions, the workshop focuses on how and why people – and especially young people – think about immigration the way that they do. It explores the role schools and universities play in preparing citizens to engage with contested questions of identity, belonging and population movement, and whether education can help rebuild trust across divides that now feel entrenched.

That concern with democratic participation runs through ***Sharing the mic: Building bridges between young people and MPs*** on 30 March, when secondary school students from across Cambridge will put detailed proposals directly to MPs from the main political parties in the Cambridge Union's debating chamber. Chaired by writer and teacher Guy Doza, the event offers a rare public glimpse of young people engaging constructively with formal politics, at a time when many feel excluded from it.

### **Race, history and the return of discredited ideas**

If immigration debates reveal contemporary fault lines, questions of race expose how unresolved the past remains. On 18 March, geneticist and broadcaster Adam Rutherford

delivers ***The unwelcome return of scientific racism***, the Olaudah Equiano Annual Race Justice Lecture.

Drawing on the history of race science and its modern reappearance in populist politics and online culture, Rutherford examines how ideas long discredited by genetics have found new audiences, from the fringes of the internet to the corridors of power. The lecture argues that complacency about these narratives is dangerous, and that understanding their history is essential to confronting their present influence.

That historical reckoning takes a more personal but no less political form in ***Searching for My Slave Roots: From Guyana's sugar plantations to Cambridge*** on 30 March. Malik Al Nasir traces his journey into his own family history, uncovering connections between enslaved Africans, white slaveholders and some of Britain's most powerful institutions. His research links the legacies of slavery to modern finance, politics and inequality, raising difficult questions about accountability and historical memory.

### **Truth, misinformation and the erosion of shared facts**

Running alongside these debates is a more fundamental crisis: the weakening of shared truth. From social media disinformation to political interference in research, the boundaries of fact and fiction have become increasingly blurred.

The problem of trust is tackled from a different angle in ***Traitors*** on 27 March, an interactive panel that asks audiences to spot the impostor among supposed experts. Drawing on the rise of AI-generated mimicry and false authority, the event uses play to reveal how easily trust can be undermined, and how scientific literacy and transparency might restore it.

That question of truth reaches a wider audience on 31 March with ***What is Truth?*** led by broadcaster and campaigner Carol Vorderman. Reflecting on misinformation, political spin and the pressures on public debate, Vorderman asks how societies can recover a shared commitment to evidence and reason in the 21st century.

### **Culture, conflict and the ways societies talk to themselves**

Political arguments do not take place only in parliaments or online. They are shaped by culture, storytelling and the spaces where societies reflect on themselves. ***Drama in Divided Times*** on 24 March explores whether theatre still plays that role, or whether television has become the primary arena for political storytelling, through programmes such as *Mr Bates vs the Post Office* and *Brexit: The Uncivil War*.

Meanwhile, ***The Cost of Witnessing: Photography and Survival*** brings together frontline photographers Giles Duley and Paul Conroy to reflect on documenting conflict and its human cost. Their work, and their own injuries sustained while reporting, raise urgent questions about journalism, accountability and the ethics of bearing witness in an age of endless images.

### **Leadership, courage and the future of public life**

As the festival looks forward, it turns to leadership and the conditions for social repair. ***Leading with courage in today's world*** on 19 March brings together Gates Cambridge Scholars from

politics, technology, academia and activism to debate what courage means amid autocracy, misinformation and declining trust.

That future-facing perspective is grounded in lived experience in **'Accidental leadership' and radical hope** on 21 March, which centres the leadership of Black and racialised women in UK public services. Drawing on research into domestic abuse provision and systemic inequality, the event explores how institutions can change when leadership emerges from the margins rather than the centre.

Economic resilience also features in **Stories from Builders of the Broken Bazaar** on 24 March, where Dr Tabish Zaman challenges romanticised ideas of entrepreneurship. Based on research with refugees and migrants, the event reframes enterprise as survival and care rather than growth alone, questioning whose innovation is valued and why.

The future of food systems is stress-tested in **Barefood: Role-playing future shocks to the food system** on 21 March. Through an immersive simulation of climate extremes, geopolitical instability and supply chain disruption, participants confront the political and economic fragility of something often taken for granted.

### Looking ahead

The festival culminates with reflections on global power and responsibility. **Anti-Americanism: A short history** traces Europe's long and conflicted relationship with the United States, from the founding of the republic to Trumpism and beyond, asking what transatlantic relations might look like in a shifting world order.

Together, these events form a single conversation about how societies change, fracture and, potentially, repair themselves. By bringing history into dialogue with the present, and pairing analysis with participation, the Cambridge Festival offers not easy answers but something rarer: the space to think seriously about how we arrived here, and what kind of future might still be possible.

**The Cambridge Festival runs from 16 March to 2 April 2026. The full programme launches today (16 February), and tickets are available to book [here](#).**

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**Press images** are available [here](#) | **Festival images** are available [here](#).

**The Cambridge Festival** is the University of Cambridge's annual celebration of ideas, discovery and debate, opening up world-leading research to everyone. This year features over 350 mostly free events across four themes – Society, Health, Environment and Discovery – inviting audiences to explore global challenges, breakthrough innovations and ideas shaping our future.

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