

What after Woke?

Echo Research and Jericho hosted a roundtable on 4th June 2025, bringing together senior leaders from corporate affairs, sustainability, communications and investment to explore whether we are witnessing a fundamental reset in business engagement with ESG, DEI and corporate activism – or a temporary retreat in response to a shifting political climate.

Held under the Chatham House Rule, the roundtable surfaced clear tensions but also opportunities for businesses to reframe their strategies, strengthen internal coherence, and recommit to substance over symbolism. The summary below captures the key themes.

Executive Summary

- **The language of ESG and DEI is evolving rapidly.** While many core commitments remain intact – particularly in Europe – businesses are recalibrating how they speak about sustainability and inclusion, often in response to political sensitivities.
- **Fear of backlash is fuelling a ‘spiral of silence’.** Concerns around reputational and legal risk (often driven by misleading media narratives) are leading many organisations to pull back from public commentary, even when operational activity continues unchanged.
- **Rollbacks reveal the fragility of past commitments.** The retreat from some public pledges – on climate, DEI or purpose – expose how often these ambitions were never structurally embedded in corporate strategy. Symbolic gestures, from rainbow logos to net zero targets, risk appearing hollow if they are not backed by credible plans, governance mechanisms, and sustained investment.
- **Some corporates have struggled to manage activism within their employee ranks.** With highly emotive issues such as Black Lives Matter, the Trans debate or violence against women there are considerable dangers implicit in ‘virtue-signalling.’ They may function within democracies in the West but businesses are not individuals with the power to vote in elections. Issues such as Brexit split families in a sometimes bitter way and can cause disharmony within corporates. “Don’t flag wave on issues that don’t affect your business directly” was one piece of advice. Deciding when a business has proper legitimacy to speak is critical.
- **A ‘third way’ is emerging: ambitious pragmatism.** Participants identified a shift towards grounded, operational leadership that focuses on measurable outcomes rather than rhetorical positioning. Carefully framing statements on political and social issues is vital to avoid antagonising different stakeholder groups.



Ambitious Pragmatism: A Strategic Middle Ground

Business must find its voice – but with care, substance and strategic intent.

“What we do hasn’t changed. What we speak about has,” one participant noted, reflecting the increasing tension between ongoing operational efforts and the need to carefully navigate political sensitivities in public discourse.

Participants emphasised the importance of moving beyond the binary framing of ‘woke’ versus ‘rollback’. Both extremes were seen as limiting: the former too often performative or unmoored from commercial logic; the latter reactive and regressive. Instead, the conversation surfaced support for a more grounded approach – what one participant called ‘ambitious pragmatism’.

This entails acting where material relevance is clear, particularly on issues such as climate, governance, and inclusion. Areas where the business case and societal case overlap. It also means de-emphasising symbolic performativity in favour of operational robustness. The focus, several agreed, should be less on visibility and more on credibility.

Reputation, Risk and the Spiral of Silence

As scrutiny intensifies, many organisations are retreating from the public square.

A clear shift in organisational posture was described: whereas once companies were vocal, even enthusiastic, about social and environmental issues, today they are more cautious, especially in the American context. Some participants spoke of heightened internal processes, where statements on ESG or DEI now require sign-off from legal and policy teams – a level of oversight that would have been unthinkable a year or two ago.

This defensiveness, while understandable, risks contributing to a wider ‘spiral of silence’. One participant noted that the perception of public hostility often outpaces actual public opinion. The fear of backlash may be more paralysing than the backlash itself.

The role of the communications leader has grown in this environment. As one attendee put it, they serve as a crucial “extra pair of eyes” – working alongside legal and policy colleagues to avoid reputational or commercial missteps, especially on issues deemed ‘material’ (though who defines what’s material remains debated).

Authenticity Over Optics

Symbolism alone is no longer enough – and may do more harm than good.

A recurring theme was the erosion of trust in performative gestures. Participants shared examples of internal debate over Pride logos, staff-authored blog posts, and statements of solidarity. These actions were often met with scepticism, both internally and externally, when unaccompanied by clear strategy or sustained investment.



What matters more now, it was argued, is operational credibility: demonstrable effort, resource allocation, clear ownership and follow-through. The performative era may be giving way to a more disciplined and measurable one – one that still aligns with purpose, but is less reliant on brand optics.

Global Complexity, Fragmented Expectations

Stakeholders do not speak with one voice, and businesses cannot adopt multiple truths.

The tension between global coherence and local responsiveness emerged as a critical challenge. Several participants noted how strategies and values that resonate in Europe can provoke backlash in the United States, and vice versa. Yet businesses are increasingly expected to present unified positions across jurisdictions.

Internal employee activism further complicates the landscape, with younger workers often pushing for progressive engagement, while boards and investors may prioritise risk mitigation. The need for clear frameworks (a 'scaffolding of decision making' defining when and how to speak, and who decides) was identified as an urgent organisational requirement.

From ESG as Branding to ESG as Infrastructure

The next era will be defined by operational integrity, not marketing.

Much of the reputational fallout in recent years, participants agreed, stemmed from organisations over-promising on ESG and under-delivering. This raises the uncomfortable question: were these commitments ever truly integrated into corporate strategy? Many DEI efforts in particular were bolted on rather than embedded, leaving companies exposed when scrutiny intensified.

In contrast, companies that had embedded sustainability into governance, capital allocation, and long-term business models are staying the course, even amidst political headwinds. The distinction, it was noted, lies in whether ESG and DEI are integrated into core strategy or bolted on as communications tools.

Conclusion: Navigating with Clarity and Courage

The roundtable closed with a shared recognition: that the operating environment has changed, perhaps permanently. But rather than retreat, this shift demands recalibration. Businesses must continue to engage on climate, equity, governance, not out of obligation, but because these issues are material to long-term viability.

The route forward is not louder statements, nor total silence, but more strategic leadership. It means knowing when to speak, why to speak, and how to act. The organisations that take this seriously (by investing in internal capability, cross-market

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coherence and stakeholder intelligence) will not only weather the current moment but shape the future terrain.

'If you care about sustainability and actually want to get things done to create a better planet then bring the temperature down," was one piece of advice from an individual with 30 years' experience of the sustainability sector," Remove emotion. Make your arguments logical when it comes to helping the bottom line. Sometimes boring is good.'