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They're not just British values - but we need them anyway

Identity can't be imposed from above, but a legally enshrined expression of our common principles is in everyone's interests

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Over the past few years there has been a growing sense of victimhood among sections of the indigenous population, a feeling that, although in the majority, white Britons are somehow being oppressed. This ridiculous idea is often expressed in radio phone-ins where disgruntled callers claim they "are no longer allowed to be British". I listen intently as the host asks them to identify who, exactly, is denying them their right to be British, and in what way. The callers offer generalisations, but ultimately fail to give any solid examples of discrimination. It always comforts me when their sense of grievance is revealed to be unfounded, which is why I am concerned that the new National Union of Teachers president may have inadvertently armed these people with a response to this question.

Speaking at the NUT conference in Harrogate, Baljeet Ghale accused ministers of fuelling racism by ordering schools to teach British values. These values were recently defined by the education secretary, Alan Johnson, as free speech, tolerance and respect for the rule of law. Had the minister simply called for these principles to be taught in school, I doubt Ghale would have criticised the idea. Her support for the teaching of tolerance was underlined later in her speech when she called for an education system that valued diversity and accepted her right to support Tottenham Hotspur (and France in the European Cup, Brazil in the World Cup, Kenya in the Olympics and India in cricket - but England in the Ashes).

Her problem, it seems, was not with teaching such values per se, but with the suggestion that they should be labelled "British". Already, I fear, furious reactionaries will be looking up the number of their local radio phone-in. Here is an example of something positive becoming unacceptable simply by being identified with the majority culture. As someone who has opposed racism for 30 years, I find that disturbing.

Of course Ghale was right to ask in what way the values Johnson cited were not also held in other countries. But the notion that British values are inherently based on our own virtues and so belong to us alone is clearly a mistaken one, fostered by politicians who, whenever they evoke the principles on which they believe society should be based, can't resist flaunting their patriotism by naming them "British values".

In fact, the values that societies hold dear tend to be universal in nature - think of France's *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, ideals upheld on this side of the Channel. In this sense, when politicians speak of "British values" they mean those which we as a society aspire to rather than those that are ours alone. And contrary to Ghale's misgivings, without such common principles to bind us, we will never be able to be a truly diverse society.

While I am not one of those who claim that multiculturalism has "failed", I do recognise it has created a vacuum at its centre. For while we celebrate our differences, we have given too little attention to those things that we have in common. As a result, trust and solidarity between communities are beginning to falter, and racist parties are exploiting this breakdown for their own evil ends.

Alan Johnson's call for the teaching of Britishness is a response to this problem, but not the solution. Too often, teaching British citizenship seems little more than a glorified history lesson. Of course, our past helps us to understand why we are all here, but knowing the date of the battle of Trafalgar isn't going to help you negotiate the modern high street. Ultimately, if we hope to use the subject to help create a more cohesive society, then Britishness has to be defined by the principles that govern our relationships with one another.

The true majority in this country are those, from whatever background, who subscribe to a set of core values - among them freedom of expression, conscience, movement, tolerance of diversity but not of hatred, respect for the rights of others, and responsibility for one's actions. If most people didn't subscribe to such principles, then life here would be simply intolerable.

Of course, anybody who has to face discrimination on a daily basis will tell you these much trumpeted values are, in reality, nothing more than aspirations. The challenge, then, is to manifest these ideals in a practical way that is accessible to all.

The subtext of Ghale's speech was that identity cannot be imposed from above. She's right. Migrants will only add a British dimension to their identity if they feel that it is in their interests to do so. The time has come for a new bill of rights, one that can be set in our own legal system, rather than relying on the European Convention on Human Rights.

An expression of our values in a document enforceable by law would give those who wished to integrate something tangible to aim for and empower newcomers to hold us to account if we fail to live up to our own aspirations.

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