

By reference to British values, what are the best values for humans to aspire to?

Introduction

No one is above the law, or at least no one should be. This principle, deeply woven into the British constitutional tradition, has its echoes across cultures and religions. Sikh jurisprudence, for example, stresses ‘sarbat da bhala,’ the welfare of all, as a guiding principle of justice, binding rulers and citizens alike under moral accountability. Similarly, the British value of the rule of law insists that monarchs and ministers are subject to the same legal framework as ordinary citizens. Taken together, these ideas reveal that the values we should aspire to are those that help create dignity, accountability, and peace in shared life.

It has long been held that Fundamental British Values are officially defined as comprising “democracy, personal liberty, rule of law, and tolerance and mutual respect.”¹ Political leaders and commentators alike have endorsed their importance. Barack Obama, for example, characterised British values as “democracy, rule of law, open markets,”² notably including capitalism as an overt and positive value. Rooted in centuries of political, legal, and cultural evolution, these values represent more than mere ceremonial rhetoric but commitments that shape the United Kingdom’s public life and institutions. Democracy, as practiced in Britain, represents the right of individuals to participate in collective decision-making. The rule of law holds the principle that all people, regardless of wealth and status are accountable under a single legal framework. And mutual respect and tolerance, particularly across faiths and beliefs, safeguards social cohesion in a pluralist society. Each of these values is presented not only as a marker of national identity, but also as a human aspiration, to have a voice, to live under fair rules, and to coexist peacefully with difference.

Yet, the claim that these are universal ideals has not gone unchallenged. Postmodernist thinkers cast doubt on democracy by questioning whether objective truths and stable values can ground such a system at all. Critical race theorists argue that the rule of law, while outwardly neutral, often conceals and perpetuates racial and systemic inequalities. Some critics argue that tolerance is flawed in practice and suggest that liberty offers a better and more principled framework for human coexistence. In this light, British values face the charge of being aspirational in theory but partial, fragile, or even meaningless in practice.

This essay will argue, however, that democracy, the rule of law, and mutual respect for difference remain among the best values humans can aspire to. By examining their historical grounding, their ethical force, and their practical impact, while engaging critically with rival schools of thought, it will be suggested that these values, though imperfect, offer the most workable framework for human dignity, justice, and peaceful coexistence.

Democracy

Democracy, one of the central British values, refers to the right of citizens to participate in the decisions that govern them, either directly or through elected representatives.³ Within the United Kingdom, this principle has not emerged fully formed but has been forged through

¹ (Home Office, 2015, p. 2)

² (Ash, *Guardian*, April 29, 2016).

³ Ian Stronach and others, ‘Fundamental British values’ (2020) 46 *British Educational Research Journal* 1.

centuries of constitutional struggle. The Magna Carta of 1215, though limited, introduced the idea that rulers must govern with the consent of the governed. Later came the Reform Acts of the nineteenth century, which gradually extended the vote to different parts of society, that securing equal voting rights for men and women. In its modern form, democracy is embedded in the principles of parliamentary sovereignty and universal suffrage, ensuring that ultimate political authority derives from the collective will of the people rather than from divine right or hereditary wealth. This notion makes democracy such an inspiring human value because it guarantees that individuals are not passive subjects of power but active participants in shaping the society they live in.

The aspiration behind democracy is evident in Britain's contemporary political life. The 2016 Brexit referendum, though divisive and still debated, demonstrated the power of democratic participation, with over 30 million citizens turning out to vote on the nation's future direction. Similarly, the repeated changes of Prime Minister in 2022, each decided through party processes and ratified by parliamentary mechanisms, underscored that power in Britain is transferred peacefully and lawfully, without resort to violence or coercion. To participate in democracy is to recognise one's equality with fellow citizens as it provides a space for accountability, a safeguard against tyranny, and a means of expressing collective aspirations. As John Stuart Mill argued, democracy is not only a system of governance but also a process through which citizens develop responsibility, debate ideas, and protect liberty.⁴ In this sense, democracy represents more than institutional machinery, it embodies the human desire for voice, fairness, and dignity in public life. A similar spirit is found in Sikh tradition, where decisions within the community are taken through 'sangat' deliberation among equals in the presence of the Guru. The emphasis here is not on hierarchy but on the shared responsibility of individuals to govern themselves together. In both traditions, the act of participation itself is what gives people dignity.

The aspiration behind democracy is evident far beyond Britain. Ukrainians who gathered in Maidan Square in 2014 did so in defence of dignity and self-determination, echoing the same principle, that people must shape their own political destiny. Similarly, the dismantling of racial segregation in South Africa was achieved through the persistent demand of ordinary citizens for equal participation. These examples demonstrate why democracy is not just a national tradition but a universal human value.

Yet, democracy is not without its critics, and this raises doubts as to whether it is truly the best British value for humans to aspire to. Postmodernist thinkers question whether it can ever live up to its claims of universality and rationality, suggesting that what is presented as a neutral, collective process often masks underlying power dynamics. Suke Wolton, in her article *Prevent Duty: Democracy Versus British Values*, develops this critique by arguing that presenting democracy as a fixed "British value" undermines the very essence of what democracy is. If democracy is defined as a timeless consensus, she argues, "it ceases to function as a practice of contestation and becomes a hollow slogan hardly an inspiring value for humans to pursue."⁵

History supports this concern. Wolton highlights the Suffragettes as a striking example as their protests, heckling politicians, chaining themselves to railings, smashing windows, and

⁴ in *On Liberty* (1859)

⁵ Suke Wolton: *The contradiction in the Prevent Duty: Democracy vs 'British values'* (2017)

even committing acts of arson, would today risk being labelled “extremist” under the Prevent Duty’s framing of democracy. Yet, without such disruptive tactics, women’s suffrage would not have been achieved. Similarly, the nineteenth-century fight for electoral reform, from the protests at St Peter’s Field that ended in the Peterloo Massacre to the passage of successive Reform Acts, demonstrates that democracy in Britain was not a gift handed down by elites but the product of “bloody, difficult” struggle. By portraying democracy as an already-settled value, Prevent distorts this history, stripping democracy of the very struggle that once made it meaningful. If democracy is remembered only as an inherited consensus, then its capacity to inspire active participation in the present is diminished.

Wolton further supports this argument by linking the hollowing out of democracy to what she calls Britain’s growing “democratic deficit.” Falling voter turnout, declining party membership, and waning trust in government reveal that many citizens no longer feel empowered to influence politics. Rather than motivating people to aspire to collective responsibility, democracy in its current framing risks leaving them alienated and disengaged. By insisting that democracy is an abstract consensus to be safeguarded, Prevent discourages the very contestation and public engagement that democracy depends upon. In this way, far from being the most inspiring British value, democracy may be one of the least “emptied of struggle, drained of participation, and unconvincing as an ideal for humans to aspire to.”

Nevertheless, even if Wolton is correct that treating democracy as a fixed value risks depoliticising it, this critique ultimately highlights why democracy remains a value worth aspiring to. It’s very strength lies in its openness to challenge, its ability to adapt, and its capacity to channel dissent into peaceful political change. Far from being undermined by contestation, democracy thrives on it. The fact that people can disagree, protest, and demand reform without destabilising the entire political order demonstrates democracy’s resilience and relevance. For this reason, democracy continues to stand as one of the most inspiring values for humanity given that it affirms that the governed are never voiceless, that power is never beyond accountability, and that change is possible through collective struggle.

The rule of Law

The rule of law has long been regarded as one of Britain’s most enduring constitutional values, and it remains a principle that humans everywhere should aspire to. At its core, the rule of law means that government and citizens alike are bound by laws that are clear, public, and applied equally. Its historical importance is reflected in the Magna Carta of 1215, which established that even the monarch was not above the law, and in A. V. Dicey’s nineteenth-century formulation of the principle. Dicey defined the rule of law through three pillars: the absolute supremacy of regular law as opposed to arbitrary power, equality before the law, and the predominance of legal spirit enforced through the ordinary courts (The Law of the Constitution, 1885). These elements remain relevant today. The prohibition of arbitrary power reassures citizens that they will not be subjected to the whims of rulers; equality before the law provides a safeguard against privilege and predictable, transparent laws enable people to plan their lives with dignity and security. Contemporary controversies highlight why these qualities still inspire aspiration. During the Partygate scandal, in which senior government officials, including Boris Johnson, were fined for breaching lockdown rules, public outrage was not only about hypocrisy but about the principle that no person, not even the Prime Minister, is above the law. It is this accountability, rooted in Dicey’s principles, that makes the rule of law a value worth aspiring to for all humanity.

The ethical force of the rule of law is best illustrated through both historical and contemporary practice. In *Entick v Carrington* (1765)⁶, the courts ruled that government agents had acted unlawfully in raiding a citizen's home without statutory authority, reaffirming the principle that state power must be legally justified. More recently, *R (on the application of UNISON) v Lord Chancellor* [2017]⁷ reinforced access to justice by striking down tribunal fees that had deterred workers from bringing claims, with Lord Reed declaring that "the constitutional right of access to the courts is inherent in the rule of law." Academic scholars such as Tom Bingham⁸ argue that without access to justice, the principle is meaningless. The relevance of this can be seen in the government's recent Legal Aid funding cuts, which the Law Society warned in 2021 had created "legal aid deserts" across the country, leaving many without effective access to justice. Such examples reveal that the rule of law does not only restrain arbitrary power but actively promotes dignity and fairness in daily life. For humans broadly, this makes it a value worth aspiring to. It is not wealth, rank, or influence that should dictate one's rights, but universal principles enforced by independent courts.

Nevertheless, critical race theorists have raised a more searching objection; that the rule of law, though inspiring in theory, fails in practice to deliver the equality it promises. Patricia Williams has argued that law often functions as a mask for systemic inequality, maintaining the appearance of neutrality while privileging dominant groups.⁹ This critique could hold substantial weight because it questions whether the rule of law, as a British value, truly secures justice in practice or merely sustains existing hierarchies. In Britain, the Windrush scandal (2018) exposed how lawful residents from Caribbean backgrounds were wrongly detained, denied healthcare, and even deported due to hostile environment policies. While officials insisted that they were "following the law," the disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities suggested that the system of law itself was complicit in racial injustice. Combined with statistics showing that Black people are nine times more likely to be stopped and searched than white citizens,¹⁰ these examples suggest that the rule of law in practice often fails to achieve the equality it promises. From this perspective, a critical race theorist might argue that humans should aspire not to the rule of law, but to mutual respect and tolerance, a value that actively engages with diversity and lived experience rather than assuming equality where it does not exist. This criticism strikes at the heart of my argument by suggesting that the rule of law is too compromised to serve as a genuine human aspiration.

However, to abandon the rule of law in favour of tolerance alone would be short-sighted. The very injustices identified by critical race theorists demonstrate why the rule of law must be preserved and reformed, not discarded. Legal scholars such as Sandra Fredman argue for substantive equality, requiring governments to go beyond formal neutrality and actively dismantle systemic disadvantage.¹¹ Reforms such as stronger judicial scrutiny of government powers, enhanced accountability in policing, and improved funding for legal aid would move the rule of law closer to its ideal. The UK Supreme Court's decision in *R (Miller) v Prime Minister* [2019], which struck down Boris Johnson's attempt to prorogue Parliament unlawfully, shows how judicial power of the rule of law can safeguard democracy itself. This

⁶ *Entick v Carrington* [1765] EWHC KB J98

⁷ *R (on the application of UNISON) v Lord Chancellor* [2017] UKSC 51, [2020] AC 869.

⁸ *The Rule of Law*, 2010

⁹ *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 1991

¹⁰ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Stop and think again: Towards race equality in police PACE stop-and-search* (EHRC 2019).

¹¹ *Discrimination Law*, 2011

illustrates why, despite flaws, the rule of law is more inspiring than tolerance alone as it provides not just an ethical ideal but the institutional mechanisms necessary to hold power to account. Far from undermining its relevance, the criticisms highlight its necessity. Thus, the rule of law, though imperfect, remains one of the most compelling British values for humans to aspire to because it offers a framework for dignity, justice, and peaceful coexistence.

Mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith

Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, and for those without faith, is a British value that directly advances human dignity, justice, and peaceful coexistence. Its importance lies in recognising that difference, whether religious, cultural, or philosophical, does not diminish a person's worth. This principle has been institutionalised through laws such as the Equality Act 2010, which prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, and through Britain's history as a multicultural society shaped by post-war immigration. Tolerance is inspiring because it allows individuals to live openly according to conscience while maintaining peace in a pluralist society. As Nussbaum argues respecting diversity is integral to justice because it highlights the equal dignity of individuals who seek meaning in different ways.¹² In practice, mutual respect reduces conflict because it establishes a foundation where disagreements can be acknowledged without turning into hostility; recognising the equal dignity of others encourages dialogue and compromise rather than fear or violence. In this sense, tolerance is not simply about passive acceptance but about actively sustaining conditions for peaceful coexistence. This dynamic was evident in the aftermath of the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing. While the attack risked fuelling hostility towards Muslim communities, interfaith groups rallied to prevent backlash, emphasising solidarity in the face of tragedy. Their actions demonstrate how tolerance can transform moments of deep division into opportunities for unity, preventing extremist violence from triggering cycles of suspicion and retaliation. The Manchester response shows that tolerance is not only a moral ideal but also a practical tool for maintaining social cohesion when it is most under threat. For humans, aspiring to tolerance means aspiring to a society where peace remains possible despite profound disagreement. It is, therefore, less a passive virtue than an active means of preserving justice, dignity, and stability in diverse communities.

However, critics argue that tolerance is deeply problematic in practice, raising doubts about whether it is truly a value humans should aspire to. The issue is one of relativism. This school of thought argues that if all beliefs must be respected equally, then harmful or discriminatory views risk being legitimised. Bhikhu Parekh highlights this problem, noting that an unqualified commitment to tolerance can shield practices that undermine justice.¹³ For example, some ultra-conservative religious groups reject women's rights and LGBTQ+ equality on theological grounds, appealing to scriptural authority and traditional gender hierarchies. These positions are controversial because they place religious orthodoxy in direct conflict with the modern human rights framework, which protects equality and dignity for all individuals. If such beliefs were respected unconditionally, tolerance would cease to promote dignity and justice and instead permit harm to vulnerable groups. In this sense, relativism directly undermines the idea that tolerance provides a workable framework for human coexistence. Critics might instead point to individual liberty as a stronger value to aspire to.

¹² Liberty of Conscience (2008)

¹³ in Rethinking Multiculturalism (2000)

John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty* (1859)¹⁴, argued that liberty should be protected except where its exercise causes harm to others. Unlike tolerance, which risks passivity towards injustice, liberty offers a principled boundary. It protects diversity of belief while explicitly rejecting practices that infringe upon the rights of others. From this perspective, liberty appears to offer a more practical framework for human dignity and peaceful coexistence than tolerance.

Yet, while relativism exposes genuine risks, it does not warrant abandoning tolerance as a human aspiration. Rather, it highlights the need for what Rainer Forst terms “critical tolerance”¹⁵ a form of respect that recognises difference while refusing to legitimise practices that deny the equal dignity of others. This approach is not passive acceptance but active engagement as it requires people to enter dialogue, to question and even challenge discriminatory views, while continuing to respect the humanity of those who hold them. For people aspiring to British values, this makes tolerance not a hollow slogan but a lived practice, it is the discipline of coexisting with difference while upholding justice. Moreover, tolerance has a distinctive strength that its critics overlook. Unlike liberty, which can be stretched to justify exclusion (“my freedom to discriminate”), tolerance already carries its own limits: it stops where harm begins. As Rawls argued in *Political Liberalism* (1993)¹⁶, intolerance towards basic rights cannot itself be tolerated. This built-in boundary ensures that tolerance remains a workable value for peaceful coexistence, even in the face of deep disagreement. To strengthen this aspiration, statutory guidance and civic education could make clear that tolerance does not mean endorsing harmful practices but recognising shared dignity while challenging injustice. Properly understood in this way, tolerance avoids the trap of relativism and proves why, despite its imperfections, it remains one of the most compelling human aspirations as it protects difference, secures justice, and sustains peaceful coexistence in pluralist societies.

In conclusion, while postmodernists challenge democracy as hollow, critical race theorists expose the rule of law’s complicity in inequality, and relativists highlight the dangers of tolerating harmful beliefs. Yet these critiques do not negate the strengths these British values hold; rather, they reveal the need for reform. History and contemporary practice alike demonstrate that when adapted and critically sustained, these values provide not only ethical aspiration but practical safeguards for human dignity, justice, and peaceful coexistence. Other alternatives, whether individual liberty alone or relativism without boundaries, lack the institutional and moral depth to serve as workable human ideals. For this reason, the strength of these British values lies not in their perfection but in their adaptability. Thus, if humans are to aspire to any values, let it be those that bind us in accountability, give us a voice, and allow us to live with difference; democracy, the rule of law, and mutual respect.

¹⁴ in *On Liberty* (1859)

¹⁵ *Tolerance in Conflict*, 2013

¹⁶ *Political Liberalism*, 1993