

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

The notion of what it means to be British is rapidly changing. Britain has long been a multi-racial country: Black communities have been present in England since at least 1500 and historian Rozina Visram has documented a considerable South Asian presence in Britain from the 1600s¹. Nonetheless, in recent decades, Britain has seen a considerable influx of immigration². Since July 2024, the House of Commons now have the highest proportion of ethnic minorities at 14%³. According to the 2021 Census data for England and Wales, 18% of people in England and Wales belong to a Black, Asian, mixed or other ethnic group⁴. A 2019 report from Global Future Foundation revealed that nearly 40% of British cultural icons come from migrant and minority backgrounds⁵.

For many, this increasing diversity has become disruptive as multiculturalism means fresh values and ideologies. People on all sides of the political spectrum have begun to question what it means to be British and, specifically, what are British values?

¹ <https://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/pre-1947-direct-migration-uk-south-asia>

² <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06077/#:~:text=The%20pandemic%20also%20disrupted%20the,populations%20in%20European%20Union%20countries.>

³ <https://news.sky.com/story/record-levels-of-diversity-in-parliament-not-by-chance-but-because-of-purposeful-effort-13176726>

⁴ <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk>

⁵ <https://globalfuturefoundation.com/reports/stretching-the-flag/>

Within the title question there are two sub-questions. First, what are British values? The second question is about the best values for humans to aspire to, considering said British values.

What are British values?

The phrase ‘British values’ is frequently parroted but less often defined. Following the 2014 Trojan Horse affair where a forged letter alleged a plot by Muslim educators to take over Birmingham schools, David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, issued a statement about British values⁶. He referred to the following as examples of these values: ‘a belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law’⁷.

Theresa May also articulated what British values are in a 2015 speech delivered when she was the Home Secretary⁸. In her speech she announced the government’s new, counter-extremism strategy to tackle Islamist and neo-Nazi hate and fear. She emphasised that equality, democracy and religious freedom were among the list of British values and that

⁶ <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/education/events/2025/06/trojan-horse-symposium#:~:text=Speakers:%20Professor%20John%20Holmwood%2C%20University,deficits%20among%20ethnic%20minority%20families.>

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/6/18/what-are-camerons-british-values>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-stronger-britain-built-on-our-values>

these values have not “just sprung out of nowhere” but rather “have evolved over centuries in response to our political, cultural, religious and intellectual history”.

Theresa May’s latter quote begs the question – how do we identify a country’s values? One may state that a country’s values is what the government state it to be but there is an issue with this uncritical approach to identifying British values. This approach fails to acknowledge that a country’s values is comprised of not just who the country says they are but also what they do and how they treat their own citizens and others. So, in determining what British values are, one must look at both what the country says and does.

‘Testing’ British values

Equality is a long-stated British value. The government’s prevent strategy, designed to tackle extremism, affirms that “universal human rights” and “full participation in our society” is a British value⁹. However, Britain’s history reveals a complex picture: Britain was one of the most successful slave-trading countries and, together with Portugal, accounted for about 70% of all Africans transported to America¹⁰. Between 1640 and 1807, Britain transported 3.1 million Africans to the British colonies in the Caribbean, North and South America and other countries.

⁹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78966aed915d07d35b0dcc/prevent-strategy-review.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-transatlantic-slave-trade-records/>

Yet, paradoxically, Britain was one of the first major powers to legislate against the transatlantic slave trade with the **Slave Trade Act 1807**, followed by the **Slavery Abolition Act 1833** – the latter ended slavery in most of the British Empire¹¹. This reveals a dual reality: British has at times valued inequality, when financially profitable, and equality. Historically, both values are ‘British’ and to assume only positive values are British values is to engage in national forgetting and selective remembrance.

Another stated value is a belief in the rule of law. While the rule of law is not defined in statute, Professor A V Dicey explained three tenets of the rule of law in 1885¹². The second tenet is that no man is above the law and everyone, regardless of rank, is subject to the ordinary laws of the land. This sentiment is captured in the **Magna Carta**, written earlier in 1215. The **Magna Carta** – commonly hailed as a foundational piece of constitutional law – was written as a solution to King John’s unequal application of the law. **Clause 29** of the Carta, which still applies today, crucially emphasises that no freeman will be imprisoned except by lawful judgment of his peers and justice cannot be sold¹³. With this value being written over 800 years ago, the rule of law is a fundamental British value.

However, British history is also littered with violations of the rule of law. For example, between 2001 to 2005, the UK government indefinitely detained nine foreign nationals

¹¹ <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-transatlantic-slave-trade-records/#:~:text=Anti%2Dslavery%20campaigners%20lobbied%20for,least%201838%20through%20apprentice%20schemes.>

¹² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200607/ldselect/ldconst/151/15115.htm>

¹³ <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originsofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/magnacarta/magnacartaclauses/>
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without trial at HMP Belmarsh prison¹⁴. This treatment was ruled by the House of Lords to be disproportionate and discriminatory – British citizens suspected of terrorism were not indefinitely detained¹⁵.

Likewise, Britain's history has been both democratic and undemocratic. Akala notes that Britain has strong subversive, countercultural traditions where groups have protested to achieve greater rights¹⁶. Between 1903 and 1914, the Suffragette movement used radical protest tactics to demand women's right to vote in the UK¹⁷. The Suffragettes organised huge demonstrations, also known as "monster meetings". The protestors heckled MPs, chained themselves to government buildings and went on hunger strikes. The state imprisoned over 1,300 women and J.R. Thorpe notes that the media depicted the suffragettes as neglectful, violent and disgusting¹⁸.

Despite this aversion towards the suffragettes, their work paved the way for certain women's right to vote. In hindsight, the Suffragette movement is seen as an example of Britain's respect for democracy and the power of protest. Yet Akala notes that these progressive, countercultural traditions are labelled as disruptive and anti-British until they bear fruit – e.g. equality – that the state want to claim themselves. Furthermore, the 'fruit' are presented as inherent British values rather than the result of serious struggle. This illustrates how British

¹⁴ <https://blogs.staffs.ac.uk/law-policing-forensics/2021/12/10/the-famous-belmarsh-case-twenty-years-since-the-detention-of-a-and-others-in-breach-of-their-human-rights/>

¹⁵ **A (FC) and others (FC) (Appellants) v. Secretary of State for the Home Department (Respondent)**

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s48TnFbBCfA>

¹⁷ <https://www.londonmuseum.org.uk/collections/london-stories/the-suffragettes/>

¹⁸ <https://suffrageandthedia.org/source/suffragettes-treated-media/>

ord Count: 2,544

history is both democratic and anti-democratic, considering the right to vote had to be fought for in the first place. The British government values both conservatism and progression.

What are the best values for humans to aspire to?

British history is multi-faceted and reveals the nation's noteworthy and notorious values: Britain has valued inequality and inequality, democracy and repressive conservatism. The next question that must be considered is what are the best British values for humans to aspire to? Specifically, out of the noteworthy British values, what is the best value to aspire to?

Criteria

In answering the second part of the title question, I will assess British values against two criteria: universality and relevance.

The best values for people to aspire to will be universal values for two reasons. First, the title question specifically asks about the best values for humans to aspire to and not just British people. Therefore, for a value to be good for all people to aspire to, it must be – to some degree – universal, cutting across cultures. Second, if the value is not universally respected then it is likely to cause division. In recent years, we have seen both national and global division. Nationally, 76% of Britons believe that Britain is divided¹⁹. Globally, much of the world is split over a plethora of issues whether it be immigration, Trump, the conflict between Israel and Palestine and more. Considering the political zeitgeist, the best value for humans to aspire to will be values that unite and not divide us.

¹⁹ <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/three-four-say-britain-divided-public-say-problems-are-less-serious-than-us>

The other criterion I will use in this paper is relevancy. Relevancy is similar but distinct from universality. For a value to be relevant it must be applicable in most or all times, whether a nation is poor or prosperous, small or big, at war or at peace. The very best values for humans to aspire to will be those that are constantly applicable.

Equality

One of the best values for humans to aspire to is equality – treating people equally in like situations. For example, if a shop employee is serving customers at a till, no customer should be treated less fairly because of their race, age, sexual orientation and other arbitrary characteristics. To treat other humans as less than because of such characteristics is to challenge, undermine or wholly reject the inherent worth each person possesses whether they are black or white, young or old, heterosexual or homosexual. Various religious texts affirm this inherent dignity within humans: Genesis 1:27 in the Bible explains that God created mankind – no exceptions – in his image²⁰. While scholars have attributed various meanings to this verse, it is commonly accepted that because humans are made in the image of God, they are imbued with immovable worth.

Another reason why equality is one of the best values for humans to aspire to is because this is a universal value. Besides from many major religions affirming equality, equality is affirmed in many international conventions as an important value. The **European Convention of Human Rights** was drafted in response to Hitler's genocidal slaughter of Jewish people from 1941 to 1945²¹. Article 14, though not a standalone right, prohibits

²⁰ <https://www.bible.com/bible/111/GEN.1.NIV>

²¹ <https://www.libertyhumanrights.org.uk/issue/what-is-the-echr-and-why-does-it-matter/>
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discrimination in the enjoyment of rights and freedoms set out by the Convention²². 46 states are signatories of this Convention²³. Similarly, the **UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination**, which has 88 signatories, declares that all human beings are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law²⁴. This consensus highlights how equality is a universal value, not unique to the Britain or countries in the West. This is a value capable of uniting all persons across religions and continents.

Furthermore, this value is highly relevant as global politics are riddled with inequality perpetuated by both government officials and citizens. First, with gender inequality: the largest, gendered voting gap is found in Pakistan. In almost 800 polling stations, the women's vote makes up only 3-10% of votes in that district²⁵. While women are legally able to vote, some men within the community prevent female relatives from voting because it is seen as 'un-Islamic'. Similarly, in 2017, the Human Rights Watch ('HRW') published a report exposing sexual violence against women during the Kenyan elections²⁶. The HRW interviewed over 60 female survivors of election-related violence and many of these women were raped by policemen or men in uniform, many of whom wore helmets and other anti-riot gear. In at least one case, a girl died after being raped. This violence against women during elections is not an isolated incident: according to an IPU study, violence against female parliamentarians is a universal, systemic problem²⁷. 55 female parliamentarians from 39

²² https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

²³ <https://www.einnetwork.org/countries-overview>

²⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-elimination-all-forms-racial>

²⁵ <https://threshold-das.org.uk/equality-around-the-world-in-6-facts/>

²⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/14/kenya-sexual-violence-marred-elections>

²⁷ https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ev/Electoral%20violence/violence-against-women-in-elections/mobile_browsing/onePag

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countries across five regions were surveyed and the IPU discovered that 81.8% of them had experienced some form of psychological violence from members of the public and fellow parliamentarians.

This election-related violence, underlined by gender inequality, undermines the integrity of the election processes and democracy itself. The high rates of violence in different parts of the world underscores how vital it is for humans to aspire to treat all equally.

Individual liberty

Fundamentally, individual liberty is the freedom to be yourself and make your own choices without unjustifiably infringing upon the rights of others. For example, the decision to get married or not is an exercise of individual liberty. One of the best values for humans to aspire to is to respect others' individual liberty.

There is a pressing need to respect individual liberty: in the year ending March 2024, there were 140,561 hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales²⁸. While there has been a 5% decrease in hate crimes generally compared to the previous year, there was a 25% increase in religious hate crimes compared with the previous year. The Home Office explained that this was driven by a rise in hate crimes against Jews and, to a lesser extent, Muslims, since October 2024. These hate crimes, which are increasingly prevalent, undermines the religious freedoms of both Jews and Muslims to express their religious beliefs and/or wear religious symbols.

²⁸ [https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024#:~:text=This%20release%20contains%20statistics%20about,offences%20\(70%25;%2098%2C799%20offences\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024#:~:text=This%20release%20contains%20statistics%20about,offences%20(70%25;%2098%2C799%20offences))

Religious hatred is not just a national issue but a global one. In any given year in Nigeria, approximately 4,000 Christians are killed by religious groups²⁹. One notable instance involved Deborah Samuel, a female student, who was murdered by fellow students after she was accused of blasphemy because she sent a voice note to a group saying “Jesus Christ is the greatest. He helped me pass my exams”. On the other side of the world, the Chinese government has been accused of committing crimes against humanity and possibly genocide against the Uyghur Muslims³⁰. There are reports that China has been forcibly mass sterilising Uyghur women to suppress the population, separating children from their families, and attempting to break the group’s cultural traditions³¹. These occurrences highlight the prevalence of religious hatred and the relevance of individual liberty.

Assessing other values

Briefly, I will also address why the other British values articulated by David Cameron and Theresa May are not the best values for humans to aspire to. For the rule of law, there are two reasons. First, the rule of law constitutional value rather than a personal value. In other words, the rule of law is a value that governmental officials and nations aspire to, but it is not an actionable, personal value. For example, A V Dicey’s first principle of the rule of law was that no man should be punished except for a breach of the law. This cannot be reformulated into a personal value for all humans to aspire to. Second, while the rule of law is relevant in most circumstances, there are legal exceptions for states of emergency. **Article 15 of the**

²⁹ <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/countries/nigeria/>

³⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037>

³¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-53220713>

European Convention of Human Rights allows governments to derogate from certain convention rights in a temporary, limited and supervised manner. In such cases, the rule of law's relevancy is limited.

Another value is democracy, but the same issue arises because democracy is not a personal, actionable value for humans to aspire to, but it is a system of government comprised of multiple values, namely, equality, individual liberty and the rule of law. The importance of democracy only affirms why equality and individual liberty are the best values for humans to aspire to.

Conclusion

To identify British values, one must look at not just what we claim our values to be but also at our history and present. The way we treat one another and the way the government treats citizens and non-citizens reveals our values. In this light, British values are both notable and notorious but out of all these values, humans ought to aspire to treat each other equally and respect each other's individual liberty. These values are pertinent for the times we live in, and these values have can unify people across nations.