

We should not be conflating liberal democratic values with British national identity

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Michael Gove recently proposed that the Independent School Standards require schools to ‘actively promote’ British values. But in what sense are democracy, liberty, respect, tolerance and the rule of law supposed to be British? The answer is a hope on the government’s part that schools might be able to strengthen allegiance to liberal democratic values by tying it up with national identity.

***Michael Hand** argues that this strategy risks putting these values on a precarious footing, given the vicissitudes of national sentiment. Moreover, since many children may not think of themselves as British, they may well draw the inference that these values are not for them.*



On 9 June [Michael Gove set out the actions he plans to take](#) in response to the vexed ‘Trojan horse’ affair. Among them is a small change to the wording of the [Independent School Standards](#), which regulate all independent schools, academies and free schools. The Standards currently require schools to ‘encourage pupils to respect the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs’. Gove proposes to replace the phrase ‘encourage pupils to respect’ with ‘actively promote’.

Last week [David Cameron warmly backed](#) his Education Secretary, declaring that “we need to be far more muscular in promoting British values”. The values listed in the Standards, he says, are “the things we should try to live by every day’ and are ‘as British as the Union flag, as football, as fish and chips”.

I support the change of wording Gove is suggesting. I agree with the government that schools should actively promote these core political values, and that there’s something a bit mealy-mouthed about the phrase ‘encourage pupils to respect’. But while we’re tweaking the Standards, I’d like to propose one more small amendment: let’s drop the word ‘British’.

In what sense are democracy, liberty, respect, tolerance and the rule of law supposed to be British values? Gove and Cameron are not daft enough to think that they’re *originally* or *exclusively* British. They’re not British in the sense that Trinitarian beliefs are Christian or peyote rituals are Native American. Presumably they’re British in the sense that they underpin the constitution and public institutions of the UK – just as they underpin the constitutions and public institutions of every other liberal democracy. But then why call them ‘British’ rather than ‘liberal democratic’?

The answer, I think, is a hope on the government’s part that schools might be able to strengthen allegiance to liberal democratic values by tying it up with national identity. Commitment to high political ideals is perhaps a little easier for those who see it as part of an identity they hold dear. Cameron wants us to feel about liberal democratic values the way we feel about football and fish and chips: these things are part of the fabric of Britishness, part of what makes us who we are. When we disobey a law, or fail to tolerate a religious practice we dislike, we’re not merely doing something wrong; we’re letting down the national side.

There are two serious problems with this strategy. First, many children in British schools are not British, or do not think of themselves as British, or have predominantly negative feelings about Britain, or rank their loyalty to Britain far below their loyalty to other groups (religious, ethnic, regional, social) to which they belong. For these children there is little to be gained from tying allegiance to liberal democratic values to national identity. And there is much to be lost by it: if I am taught that democracy and liberty and tolerance are British values, but I feel no attachment to Britain, I may well draw the inference that these values are not for me.

Second, the rhetoric of Britishness badly obscures the good reasons we have to endorse liberal democratic values.

If we're going to promote these values in schools – as I've agreed we should – we have a duty to furnish children with sound reasons for them. Such reasons are readily available, but they have nothing to do with being British. The case for liberal democracy rests on some powerful lessons from history and some compelling arguments in ethics and political philosophy; and the case is exactly the same in the UK as in any other country. The danger of presenting these values as British, and suggesting that their appeal is analogous to that of football and fish and chips, is that children invest in them, if at all, for entirely the wrong reasons. Attachment to Britain is no justification at all for allegiance to liberal democratic values. And where allegiance is secured on this basis, it is likely to be precarious. Even the most patriotic citizens sometimes feel let down by Britain, or stifled by its mores and manners, or fed up with football. The vicissitudes of national sentiment make it an unpromising foundation for a robust and stable commitment to liberal democracy.

By all means, then, let's move from merely encouraging respect for liberal democratic values to actively promoting them. But let's also stop muddying the educational waters by conflating this task with the promotion of British national identity.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: Policy Network

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