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# **The Paradox of Tolerance: Why Free Speech is Essential to Combat Extremism in Britain**

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*“Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.”*

Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945)

## Introduction

Britain has sacrificed free speech on the altar of tolerance and respect. At first glance, this may appear a noble and inclusive goal, especially in a multi-cultural Britain. Who wouldn't prefer a society in which all feel that their beliefs, perspectives and ways of life are tolerated and each person given respect regardless of their differences? But we have lost sight of the basis of our culture. Individual liberty is the foundational British value and tolerance merely a necessary condition to protect this right. We have a right to live as we wish and not be discriminated against for it, not the right to be free from criticism or offence.

Instead, we have elevated tolerance as the sacrosanct value, interpreted it as protection from judgement, and have become prepared to suppress freedom to genuflect to it. This collective subversion of our values has led to the paradox whereby we now believe we must tolerate values that do not align with *British Values* to protect *British Values*. This has created a permissive culture where the mechanism to challenge, question and reject extremist views has been disabled.

Only if we can speak freely is it possible to challenge bad ideas, critique the premises they are based on, express disquiet, ask searching questions and label a belief or opinion as beyond the pale. When this freedom is curtailed by a collective mindset that such speech would transgress the higher values of tolerance and respect, then we have lost the ability to counter any extremist views we should find intolerable. Mistakenly we could take the path that maintains that to suppress extremism we must control speech more tightly. We argue the opposite: to successfully counter extremism, we must safeguard the very freedoms upon which *British Values* have been built so that all in Britain can truly be free to defend them.

Extremism, the fear it provokes and governmental responses to extremism have become central issues within British society, particularly since the early 2000s and significant terrorist attacks around this time. The Prevent strategy ([2015](#); [2023](#)) to tackle radicalisation evolved from this period and within it the definition and promotion of *British Values*. In 2014, Michael Gove, the then Minister for Education, made it mandatory for schools to actively promote these values. However, *British Values* have been met with scepticism and suspicion (e.g., [Hunter-Henin & Vincent, 2018](#)) and we propose that, both in schools and in wider society, there has

been an overemphasis on tolerance and respect alongside a reluctance to acknowledge that *British Values* based on individual liberty is a legitimate concept we collectively subscribe to.

How has Britain become a society that tolerates all, demands performative respect, and only selectively challenges intolerance? To explore this question, we examine the concept of *British Values*: how they are collectively understood, how they have been implemented in schools and public life, and why these efforts have had limited success (or have even exacerbated the problem). We then go on to examine how tolerance and respect have usurped freedom to become our core value and the consequence of this being the loss of the key tool by which intolerant ideologies can be confronted and challenged.

We will then consider what can be done to ensure that the value of free speech is properly restored to ensure free debate, which challenges extremism, is permissible, and restore a collective understating that tolerance is a necessary condition to protect our freedoms and not a supreme value in its own right.

## ***British Values and Their Implementation***

Within the United Kingdom (UK), *Fundamental British Values* have been defined and proposed by the *Prevent* strategy (2015; 2023) to form the basis of a well-functioning, cohesive and flourishing society. These values include:

- democracy
- the rule of law
- individual liberty
- mutual respect and tolerance.

The Prevent strategy aims to reduce the likelihood of individuals being drawn into extremism and identifies the education sector as a core point for implementation. However, for values to truly embed and be collectively owned, a nation must believe they reflect a reality, that they are relevant and important, and have utility and applicability towards a shared goal. Only then will they invest in embodying and heralding these values across contexts and interactions.

### **Two Prevailing Assumptions About *British Values***

Two dominant assumptions underpin the widespread scepticism toward *British Values*:

#### **1. *British Values* are not uniquely British but are instead *Universal Values*.**

- This perspective is endorsed by organisations like [EqualiTeach](#), who argue that values such as democracy, tolerance and liberty are not exclusive to Britain but are shared by many societies globally.

## 2. Promoting *British Values* is inherently racist and a continuation of Britain's colonial legacy.

- Scholars such as Yildiz (2021) argue that the concept of *British Values* is politically charged due to its association with counter-extremism efforts, which can marginalize minority communities.
- Other critiques suggest that *Prevent* and *British Values* policies contribute to the securitization of minority groups and the suppression of dissent (O'Donnell, 2016; Tufail & Poynting, 2023).

### British or Universal?

The discourse around values often assumes that values are innate and universal and therefore not culturally variable, whilst often also paradoxically claiming that morality is relative, and no culture is superior to another so must not be critiqued.

Research into the development of morality based in developmental psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, and philosophy provides evidence for both innate factors and cultural variations. Several studies suggest that moral reasoning and certain moral intuitions are biologically hardwired and emerge early in life. This perspective is supported by Evolutionary Theory: that morality has evolved as a mechanism to promote cooperation and group survival (Tomasello, 2016; Haidt & Joseph, 2007), and anthropological research which suggests that core moral principles, such as fairness, harm avoidance, and reciprocity appear in all societies, even though their application may differ (Graham et al., 2011).

However, while certain moral foundations may be universal, how morality is expressed and emphasised, and which values are given priority is shaped by culture. Haidt and Joseph (2007) with their *moral foundation theory* argue that cultures vary in how they emphasise different moral dimensions, such as care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. *Social learning theory* (Bandura, 1986) suggests that children learn moral norms through parental guidance, education, and peer interactions, and Shweder (1997) found that different societies prioritise different moral values based on historical, religious, and social factors.

Therefore, not all cultures share the same values in the exact same way. While many cultures do endorse some similar fundamental principles, like fairness, respect, and the importance of community, their interpretations, priorities, and practices can differ widely. For example, Western cultures often emphasise individual rights and freedoms, such as free speech and personal autonomy, as central values. In contrast, other cultures might prioritise community well-being, social harmony, duty, hierarchy and collective responsibility over individual expression.

It is therefore reasonable to describe a set of values as 'British', which can convey that whilst not unique to Britain they are the values on which British culture is based.

### **Where do *British Values* come from?**

Western values, emphasizing individual rights, freedom and tolerance are rooted in Greek, Roman, and Judeo-Christian traditions. Early Christianity developed the concepts of human dignity and moral autonomy, later reinforced by Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, who argued for natural rights and limited government. Enlightenment ideals had a direct impact on historical events such as the American and French Revolutions, leading to constitutional guarantees of individual liberties. The British liberal tradition, exemplified by the Magna Carta and John Stuart Mill who, in his work *On Liberty* (1859), argued that individual freedom should only be restricted when necessary to prevent harm to others. Mill stressed the importance of individual liberty, a principle further strengthened by capitalism and civil rights movements advocating for equality and self-determination.

Whilst there is an emphasis on individual liberty in Western thought, many non-Western cultures and societies have developed value systems and collectivist traditions that prioritise social harmony, familial responsibility, collective well-being, duty and hierarchy over personal autonomy or individual rights (Hofstede, 1980). Islamic traditions, Eastern philosophies, and authoritarian states tend to balance individual rights against broader societal or religious obligations, sometimes restricting personal freedoms (e.g., restrictions on speech, blasphemy, dress, personal relationships, and religious conversion) in favour of communal stability and, in the case of authoritarian states, state control. Societies that do not prioritise individual liberty also devalue tolerance. When social conformity is prized, tolerance is not required and poses a threat.

In Western society, you are free to make decisions that could be perceived as immoral to some or amongst certain religions or communities (e.g., engage in adultery, divorce, renounce your religion, love and share a life with someone of the same sex); whilst, in many non-western contexts, many of these acts would be seen as highly transgressive and would be impermissible or result in significant social, legislative or community sanction or even death (e.g., [Bearak & Cameron, 2016](#); [Pew Research Center, 2022](#); [Poushter & Kent, 2020](#))

### **Are *British Values* racist?**

Even if we can agree that *British Values* are by no means universal, discomfort and unease with *British Values* remain. We propose that the promotion of any set of values dubbed *British* triggers associations to a British colonial past, linked with oppression, conquest, violence and bloodshed. Anything then that hints at national pride or preference for anything emerging or originating in Britain is distrusted as it is viewed as maintaining Britain's colonial legacy and can then be categorised as racist.

Of course, there are many who do express a national pride, a sense of British identity with a warm embrace of Britain and Britishness, and a desire to preserve varying degrees of British culture. This can sometimes lean towards traditional conceptualisations of Britain and links to British history: the Royal Family, Big Ben, Christian traditions, Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen, cream teas, Hockney, Dunkirk, Wimbledon, Manchester United, Henry the Eighth, Glastonbury, Oasis, cricket, pub culture, The Battle of Britain, roast dinners, fish and chips, the Balti curry, the British reserve. This is not dissimilar to French and Italian national pride in which they rejoice in their cuisine, culture, art, history and their customs. Conversely, there are those that will wince and feel unease in relation to any list that even tries to define a traditional sense of Britishness, such as the one above. This appears to derive from a belief that it is less inclusive and culturally sensitive to define Britishness without reference to its changing ethnic and cultural demographic. Britain, especially in its larger cities, has become very multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. It may be felt that to revere traditional aspects of British culture is to potentially exclude those from other cultures or to imply a preference or superiority over other cultures. We would argue that it is possible to cherish traditional aspects of Britain whilst also appreciating varying degrees of Britain's multicultural transformation. Nevertheless, it appears that the lingering discomfort evoked by Britain's colonial past has led to societal endeavours to create *inclusive* environments, *anti-racist* organisations that advance the progress, needs and interests of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in Britain, and more radical reforms or proposals to reduce potential discrimination (e.g., through differing sentencing for ethnic minorities; e.g., [BBC, 2025](#)). Specifically within education, there have been movements to 'decolonise' the curriculum in schools, colleges and universities to ensure that students are fully educated about Britain's colonial legacy, especially from the perspective of those colonised, that there are increased numbers of teachers from ethnic minorities, and that curricula are adapted to include materials from other cultures to challenge the perception of a Eurocentric or exclusively British focus (e.g., [National Education Union, n.d.](#)).

This tendency to view *British Values* or Britain itself as racist, exclusionary or insensitive occurs in a context where critical social justice is commonly drawn upon in public discourse. This is a way of conceptualising the world in which it is proposed that all groups vary in their degree of privilege and power and discrimination is maintained by oppressive systems or approaches within institutions, organisations, and society (e.g., [See the Wheel of Privilege and Power](#) by Mullaly, 2010; Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020). Through this lens and drawing on its colonial past, Britain can be viewed as an oppressive force in which racism is still systemic within institutions and society (e.g., [Independent, 2023](#)) and therefore, to some being "Pro-Britain" can conjure up associations with far-right extremism or racist violence (e.g., [Amnesty International, 2024](#)). We propose that this conceptualisation contributes to

a society that silently tolerates the intolerable. If views or actions that are incompatible with *British Values* are expressed by certain groups or communities that are deemed oppressed, victimised or marginalised, people may become paralysed to openly discuss, challenge and critique in the name of tolerance and respect. They may stay silent, dismiss or ignore the gravity of the concern. Conversely, if views or actions that are incompatible with *British Values* are expressed by those perceived to be part of a majority or dominant group (e.g., men, white people, heterosexuals), people may be more inclined to offer a direct critique, actively suppress the view, or to report it. For example, when the Batley Grammar teacher showed children the Charlie Hebdo caricature of the Prophet Muhammad in a lesson on free speech, there was limited outrage or condemnation from the public or teaching unions regarding the death threats and protests intimidating a professional into hiding. Instead, apologies were made in the name of tolerance and respect of a minority religious group.

Moreover, a muting of concerns around specific groups can create 'sacred castes' in society that are placed beyond critique and scrutiny. We know from past safeguarding reviews that failures occur when protected groups immune from challenge arise, with those who raise questions side-lined and concerns suppressed. Examples of safeguarding failures as a result of some groups being placed beyond reproach or scrutiny are often more easily acknowledged historically (commentary on the failure of others to speak up) but continue as a current phenomenon (our own failure to speak up). An example of this from the past was the sexual abuse of children by Catholic priests, with more recent examples being the rape gangs in Northern English cities involving predominantly Pakistani men, or the concerns raised around the treatment of gender confused children, where the deliberate strategy was *#NoDebate*, leading to professionals failing to follow the standard procedures they would have for any other group of children.

There can also be a reluctance to speak openly about how devious individuals may utilise a minority group status and the protection from critique that status may provide to conceal their intentions and abuse. To do so may be construed as expressing intolerance for that minority group or tarnishing the group for the actions of the few. For example, there are instances of people identifying as LGBTQ+ and gaining access to vulnerable children and women with depraved intentions of abuse (e.g., former head of Surrey Pride and patron of *Educate and Celebrate*, Stephen Ireland convicted of child sex crimes; James Rennie, a ringleader of a paedophile network and former chief executive of LGBT Youth Scotland; Andrew Easton, a convicted paedophile, who wrote 'coming out' guides for LGBT Youth Scotland; Isla Bryson, a Scottish serial rapist who began identifying as a woman and gained temporary access to a women's prison).

Importantly, this differential treatment of different groups depending on their perceived status in society potentially emerges even within *Prevent* itself. For example, a recent *Prevent review* (Shawcross, 2023) found that Islamist views that contravened British values or indicated radicalisation were targeted less, whilst mildly controversial right-wing commentary with no clear connection to radicalisation were focused on more and associated with far-right extremism. Tolerance is crucial in a civilised and free society, but its current misapplication is hindering societal relations through perceptions of differential treatment and fostering extremism through this silent toleration.

## British Tolerance

Britain has historically experienced conflict between religions (Protestants and Catholics), and within multicultural relations following immigration from former colonies, and beyond, in more recent years. These challenges have led to tolerance becoming a powerful value in the psyche of the nation, believed necessary to protect social harmony, and a creeping fear of speech that may destabilise this. In a society where differences in religion, traditions, history and culture have become ever more evident, a belief has developed that to avoid conflict and instability, it is necessary to ensure that tolerance is elevated over free speech.

The elevation of this tolerance, however, has been equally applied to not only the toleration of different traditions, but also to the toleration of different values, so that the paradox emerges: values that do not align with *British Values* must be tolerated to protect *British Values*.

Legislation that reflects this increasing commitment to tolerance has been put in place such as *The Race Relations Act* (1965), *The Equality Act* (2010), *The Human Rights Act* (1998), the development of ever stronger and more frequently enforced legalisation around hate speech, and the *Online Safety Act* (2023). There is far less emphasis in legislation or in the culture on freedom of speech. Despite the British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's recent declaration (February 27th, 2025) that "*we've had free speech for a very, very long time in the United Kingdom, and it will last for a very, very long time yet*", a schism is becoming apparent between the UK and its neighbour to the west.

## USA vs UK

This divergence between the USA and the UK was recently revealed in a blistering speech by JD Vance, Vice President of the USA to the Munich Security conference (2025). Vance accused Europe of a retreat "*from some of its most fundamental values*" and stated, "*free speech, I fear, is in retreat.*"

He singled out the UK in this retreat:

*“And perhaps most concerningly, I look to our very dear friends, the United Kingdom, where the backslide away from conscience rights has placed the basic liberties of religious Britons in particular in the crosshairs.”*

Vance went on to give recent examples of restrictions on free speech, such as The Abortion Services (Safe Access Zones) (Scotland) Act 2024 where silently praying, even in your own home, could be prohibited if within the safe access zone. He audaciously challenged the UK and Europe to recall the shared values of freedom that the West fought the Cold War to protect and which he believes are in danger of being lost. He firmly committed the USA to ensuring the protection of these values and urged the UK and Europe to follow them.

Although many reacted with outrage at this deliberately provocative speech, it should give us pause to consider why the USA is preserving their commitment to free speech whilst the UK and others in the West are turning away from it. There is an interesting contrast between the U.S. Constitution where free speech is in the *First Amendment* and *Prevent's British Values* where free speech is not explicitly referred to in the listing of *British Values* but is subsumed under *individual liberty* or democratic values and only directly named when time is taken to unpack these headings.

The *First Amendment* in the USA is not just a legal protection; it is a powerful value in the American psyche. Not only does it offer very broad and robust legal protections so that even speech that many find offensive or hateful is generally allowed; Americans also identify it as foundational to their nation and a right worth defending. The value of tolerance, however, is not explicitly referred to in the U.S. Constitution.

The Americans have therefore ensured through their constitution that *liberty* based on a foundation of free speech is the value which is most highly protected and that *tolerance* of this is a necessary condition of individual freedom and not a value to be elevated over freedom itself.

In the UK, we have gone in an opposite direction of travel:

*Suppressing speech to be tolerant, instead of being tolerant of the right to free speech.*

## How does this encourage extremism?

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that to suppress extremism we must control speech. Instead, we need to free those who have been censored through '*tolerance*' to speak more freely. Without this, those who do not subscribe to the liberal view of tolerance have the

opportunity to dominate and intimidate. Tolerance itself becomes a useful weapon for those who won't subscribe to it to use against those who insist upon it.

Tolerance without free speech leads to a silent acquiescence of things we believe to be wrong because to judge them would be perceived as intolerance. The social and legal consequences of being viewed as intolerant have become more severe than those for holding some views that do not align with *British Values*.

Free speech is not only a fundamental and natural right, but also the tool we have to challenge, undermine and openly reject extremist ideologies. Censorship, whether self-imposed or legally regulated, at best can merely provide an illusion of homogeneity, whilst in reality it creates a culture of meek permissiveness that allows extremist views to go unchallenged.

The fear that allowing more free speech will also allow views to be expressed that are offensive, that some find hateful, upsetting, and even abhorrent is well placed. The risk within this is real. However, the risk of suppressing speech and replacing this with an imposed set of parameters by those with authority should strike us with more fear. Using authority to enforce homogeneity under the guise of respect and tolerance will not prevent extremist views; it will merely foster resentment. When citizens have genuine concerns or feel that liberties are being violated and cannot freely express these related to social or legal sanction, they will find avenues to express that discontent and outrage. These avenues will not always be appropriate, and we argue will affect genuine social cohesion more in the long run. A fiery representation of the potential impact of that resentment were the anti-immigration protests and violent disorder that were sparked by the tragic Southport stabbings of young children in 2024. The only hope to truly counter views that do not align with *British Values* is to ensure the freedom on which they are based is protected to allow the case for them to be stridently made.

**Tolerance should mean:**

- Tolerating hearing things that you disagree with.
- Tolerating that everyone has an equal right to different views and to live differently.
- Tolerating the dignity of each individual.
- Tolerating the discomfort of living with people whose views may offend you.
- Tolerating the discomfort of being critiqued and judged.

**Tolerance should *not* mean:**

- All views are equally valid and therefore cannot be critiqued.
- You have a right to not be offended.

We must therefore all grapple with, and be honest about, the reality of living with *British Values*:

You will live in a country where people will hold and express opinions you dislike, which offend you, and cause you discomfort.

This will mean:

- Christians must tolerate satirical depictions of their faith, such as a black woman playing Jesus.
- Muslims must tolerate offensive portrayals, including cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.
- Jewish people must tolerate Pro-Palestinian demonstrations and tolerate anti-Zionist views.
- Gay, lesbian and bisexual people must tolerate that some view their relationships as immoral.
- Transgender women must tolerate that some people do not view them as women.
- Police officers must tolerate public criticism and anti-police protests.
- Feminists must tolerate the existence of views that promote traditional gender roles.
- Men must tolerate views that denigrate masculinity.
- Climate activists must tolerate public debates that question climate change or downplay its urgency.
- Conservatives must tolerate progressive social views that challenge tradition.
- Immigrants must tolerate public debates about immigration policies and national identity.

We cannot legislate for politeness. The rules of polite society must be set and managed socially. What is acceptable in a work context will be different from a dinner party, which will differ from the pub. It will differ between friends and strangers, between different communities, between formal and informal settings, private and public.

But we need a legal and cultural framework underpinned by our core value that protects free speech in our civic institutions where it is crucial that ideas are challenged, and the truth is sought without censorship.

### How do we achieve this?

We confidently reassert freedom of speech as a core and central value in British culture.

We relaunch *British Values* as *The Values of Britain*, ready and willing to engage with the resistance previously exposed. Within this, we name *free speech* as a core value, and tolerance and respect are subsumed within this as the toleration of the rights of other's liberty.

In this way, we revert the subversion of the values that has taken place.

We return to schools as a point of implementation, and we specifically teach children in developmentally appropriate ways to tolerate the discomfort of exposure to and engagement with different viewpoints, and the skills on how to do this while respecting the rights and dignity of all individuals. In this way, we prepare a generation to understand the value of free speech in the culture they live in, and to have the skills to tolerate and engage in this civilly. Children have instead been taught that exposure to challenge and discomfort should be avoided and is something they should be protected from. When we do this, the culture of *emotional safetyism* seeps out into the wider culture and denies them the opportunity to learn to tolerate the discomfort of disagreement and the skills to engage well.

Schools should adopt *Speak Charters* based on *The Values of Britain* that ensure children and young people understand that:

1. Diversity of viewpoint is reasonable, and disagreement can be accepted.
2. Every person must be treated with dignity and ideas and arguments challenged, not the person.
3. Every person must be prepared to tolerate feelings of discomfort when their views or choices are critiqued.

If we can boldly articulate free speech as a core *Value of Britain* and fearlessly defend the attacks on it then this would give us the best, or only, route to counter the extremism which is festering unchallenged in corners of Britain.

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**Dr Claire McGuiggan** has been a practising psychologist for over 25 years working in local authorities and private practice. Claire's work has been particularly focused on supporting families, boys who have been excluded, and young people's experience of anxiety cycles. She has also focused her practice on the needs of young people presenting with confusion or distress around identity development and helping them explore this to deepen their understanding of themselves. Claire also has an interest in the role of free speech on the cognitive, moral and emotional development of children and has developed the Speak Space programme with Dr Peter D'Lima to promote young people's skills and resilience to engage in discussions with differing viewpoints.

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**Peter D'Lima** is an educational and clinical practitioner psychologist working in local authorities, the NHS and in private practice. Peter is trained in techniques to enhance family relationships (e.g., TheraPlay; Video Interaction Guidance, Non-Violent Resistance) and enjoys using coaching psychology to enhance the likelihood of positive change with individuals and within complex systems. Peter has contributed to research and thinking around preventing extremism, children's social media use, and identity issues. Peter has additionally published on the necessity of free speech for children's development and works with schools to implement the Speak Space programme to develop young people's skills and confidence to engage in discussions around contentious issues.