

British Values

At the recent UKIP conference quite a lot was said (to applause) about *British values*. Immigrants, it was felt, should accept British values. We heard less about what British values are and nothing about what authority they could have or where it could come from.

A value must be something had in common. The pound coin is what used to be called “legal tender” with a fixed value relative to other British currency units. The opinion that a pound is really worth 240 pence is ineffective and does not affect the value either of the pound or the penny.

What moral, spiritual, cultural matters count as values, and is there such a thing as a common “British value” which not to share is not to be British?

When efforts are made to define British values they usually include the now traditional freedoms of speech, the press, public assembly, and voting. The point of all these is to allow different opinions and judgement. As a value, freedom to differ must be paradoxical. We have in common that we value having nothing in common? And if there could be found anybody holding the opinion that freedom of the press is not good, would that be unBritish?

Then: what we are offered as values are not always held by people who are indisputably British. Attachment to “democracy” for instance. Are monarchists unBritish?

Is freedom of speech, in any case, in practice, a British value? It is not valued if a British man or woman expresses the opinion that races differ. At the Conservative Party conference the week after UKIP, the Home Secretary announced that if the Conservatives win the next general election, laws will be introduced to prevent “extremists” addressing public meetings or using the social media to propound their views. “Extremist” goes with “populist”: extremists and populists are those who hold views contrary to the views held by the governing élite. However interpreted, the proposal is to inhibit freedom of speech and the media.

But does that make Mrs May unBritish? Could it be that the real British value is *muddling through*?

It is a blessing to be able to be proud of one’s country: but if not it has to be loved anyway. (While we are glancing at *values* let us postpone what *love* means.) What is desirable in immigrants as in natives is that they should love their country. It is not a promising start if an immigrant has come here just to make more money than was to be made at home, often by the exercise of real skills needed at home. It does not bode well that the immigrant seems not to have had much love for his own country.

What has to be loved is the country itself, even if its character shows that there is urgent need for improvement. The character of a nation is not the same as the values its ruling classes instil. Remember the USSR.

In any case must not a value in the life of the community be something we not only share but commit ourselves to as good? But are we not then on the threshold of belief?

If it’s a question of common belief everything gets simpler. The Church of England and the Church of Scotland are by law established, and what the Church of England believes is to be found in the Catholic creeds and the Church’s formularies.

Why is nobody suggesting that immigration should be limited to people who have been baptised and confirmed? Because then the élite would return to the assertion of *toleration* as a value, that is, of what we *don’t* all believe, and we are no wiser about what is British.

Joseph Conrad was nearly the ideal immigrant: not only making his new country home, but falling in love with its language. T. S. Eliot was even better because he worked out both in his poems and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* what sense there can be in the idea of what is really British, and of chiding and laughing at it, but loving it.