

# IN DEFENCE OF BRITISH VALUES: FREEDOM, THE WORK ETHIC, AND THE FAMILY



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It is widely regarded nowadays as wrong to speak up on behalf of values of any sort. Values, after all, our cynical intellectuals tell us, are merely epiphenomenal derivatives of socially structured interests, a cloak of rhetoric designed to hide the vulgar force of naked power.

From this same jaded perspective, one is liable to be condemned as even more politically incorrect if one so much as suggests that any such thing might exist as specifically British values. To argue that British values as such are real, that they matter, and that they should be defended is to invite immediate arraignment by the High Panjandrums of Hampstead and by the Thought Police at Guardian Headquarters on a charge of allegiance to the perverted consciousness of neo-fascist hoodlums.

What nonsense. Consider the Union Jack. My flag, and yours, and ours. The British flag. The flag of liberty. The emblem of the spirit of the British people. It represents the interests of Britain, and symbolises — underlying, defining, and supporting those interests — British values. Under its protection, I offer here a brief defence of British values, particularly in regard to the work ethic and the family.

The spirit of my argument is accurately represented in some words of George Canning (later Foreign Minister and Prime Minister) from the prospectus of the *Anti-Jacobin* (1797), the journal he ran for Pitt the Younger as an antidote to the subversive propaganda of Francophile radicals).

“We confess, whatever disgrace may attend such a confession, that we have not so far gotten the better of the influence of long habits and early education, not so far imbibed that spirit of liberal indifference, of diffused and comprehensive philanthropy, which distinguishes the candid character of the present age, but that we have our feelings, our preferences, and our affections, attaching on particular places, manners and institutions, and even on particular portions of the human race.

“It may be thought a narrow and illiberal distinction — but we avow ourselves to be partial to the country in which we live, notwithstanding the daily panegyrics which we read and hear on the superior virtues and endowments of its rival and hostile neighbours. We are prejudiced in favour of her establishments, civil and religious, though without claiming for either that ideal perfection which modern philosophy professes to dis-

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cover in the other more luminous systems which are arising on all sides of us.”

## BRITISH VALUES

I shall not elaborate here on the specificities of British values as such in general terms. I presume that they are unique to Britain, but that they are a sub-set, defined uniquely by our capacities, our history and our choices, of that Judaeo-Christian value-system which, incorporating Hellenism, has created and sustained the civilisation of the Free World. This is the civilisation of modernity, of democracy, of capitalism, and of science. Its purposes are recognisable in terms of contrast with its modern enemies — communism, fascism, militant Islam, and the play-way hedonism of post-Christian decadence. Its most fundamental element is freedom — but freedom construed as the capacity of individual men and women to make rational decisions as autonomous moral agents about their own best interests.

The specifically British contribution to this whole civilizational complex has been enormous. I would emphasise in particular among these contributions: constitutional government; parliamentary democracy; tolerance; honesty; enterprise; and scientific curiosity.

Within our own value-system, these gifts which we have handed on to the Free World as a whole naturally play a central part. It comprises, however, many other value elements in addition, and it is defined not just by its constituent elements but also, like any other value-system, by its own unique and subtle patterning of all its various components. Within the British value-system, the two elements on which I have chosen to focus here — protection of the family and commitment to hard work — are crucial parameters of freedom itself. If we cannot successfully defend the family and the work ethic against their enemies, it will prove impossible, I suggest, to sustain our freedom.

## WORK AND THE WORK ETHIC

There were many distinct causes of the failure and collapse of socialism which was symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Not the least significant among them was a doctrinaire misconstrual of the real nature of work which is inherent in socialist ideology. Socialists are correct in their emphasis on the importance of work, and hence in their principled antipathy to unemployment. They are gravely mistaken, however, in their interpretation of the meaning of the importance of work, and hence in their prescriptions for a cure for unemployment.

Work is not essentially, or indeed even primarily, a merely instrumental means to material livelihood. Nor therefore can it be properly encompassed within the trite slogan of “the right to employment”, or engineered into existence by the state apparatus. Work is rather man’s normal and natural mode and arena of individual creativity, self-expression, and competitive achievement (Rand, 1994). In free societies, this arena is liberated from arbitrary authoritarian interference, and scope for creativity, self-expression, and achievement is thus maximised. Free Labour and freedom as such are psychologically and institutionally inseparable (Chodes, 1994).

Work is also and equally, besides its constitutive role in the character of free individual persons, a fundamental characteristic of the free society and of liberal culture. Wherever

work is misunderstood and mishandled, wherever it is treated merely as a welfare right or as a civic duty, we can be sure that slavery in one form or another is either already established or imminently pending.

If work — properly understood and appropriately organised — is thus fundamental to basic human aspirations and to the essentials of human nature, and if it is also constitutive of the ultimate structure of the free society, then the cost of interfering with natural and normal work systems is bound to be high indeed. Little wonder if socialism failed and is doomed to fail wherever men yield to its temptations.

If the state appropriates the rights and responsibilities of entrepreneurs, new and genuine work cannot be created.

If the state seizes for itself the right to employ workers, genuine employment is squeezed out of existence.

If the state presumes to plan the productive system and the labour market, the normal and natural mechanisms which create and sustain real work — property, the family, an independent legal system, and the market — wither and die.

If the state seeks to equalize and otherwise to manipulate work incentives, motivation dries up, and only force is left as a mechanism for securing compliance with a prosperous society’s work requirements.

If the state prevents individuals seeking and retaining just rewards for their work on behalf of themselves as individuals and their families, people’s natural initiative and enterprising effort are either stifled or distracted into destructive activities.

If the state seeks to reduce unemployment by inventing specious work or by paying the workforce on anything but a temporary and modest basis for doing nothing or next to nothing, society’s resources are squandered, and the whole basis of the work ethic is sabotaged.

All of this is what has happened — and not accidentally, but as a result of deliberate ideological intent — under socialism. Hence in large part its disastrous and inevitable failure, and the ignominious collapse of socialist societies into economic bankruptcy, moral vacuity, and civil strife.

If these destructive outcomes are to be avoided in Britain, we shall have to learn the hard lessons of failed socialism, and handle work wisely and well. We must at all costs, and despite whatever siren temptations, preserve and strengthen the cultural values and the institutional arrangements which are essential to a free labour market and a liberal economy.

In Europe there are currently powerful forces at work pressing the peoples of the continent in the dangerously destructive directions mapped out by socialism. The Social Chapter would rapidly hedge the work system round with controls and regulations which would destroy it within decades. In the United States and in the rest of the free world except Japan, hysterical reactions to high levels of unemployment threaten a similar outcome over a longer period.

All these pressures must be resisted vigorously. Only by preservation of the work ethic, a free labour market, and a liberal economy can we bring unemployment down to tolerable levels, and only thus can we secure for the British people the freedom which is indeed their genuine right.

My book *Work and Employment in Liberal Democratic Societies* (1994), which I edited for Paragon House, addresses

all these issues in detail. I hope that its several chapters, by Dennis O’Keeffe, Peter Saunders, and Walter Williams, among others, may be widely read, and drawn strenuously to the attention of our politicians and our educators.

For we have a serious problem about work and the work ethic in Britain. Our long-standing commitment to hard work and high standards, which was for more than a hundred years shared by most British people in every station of life, has been gravely weakened by the locust decades of state welfare. Unless we enter urgently on root and branch reform of the Welfare State, and unless without delay we bring the subversive saboteurs of the work ethic among our school teachers, our academics, and our moral pundits under control — without this the whole economy will gradually dwindle into irreversible collapse. Our economic competitors will increasingly control our lives, and here at home our freedom will be challenged by demagogues of left and right intent on answering swelling demands for ruthless solutions to unemployment, poverty, and civic decay.

### THE FAMILY

I turn next to the family. I do not need to rehearse the sadening facts about the rate of divorce, about the increasing scale of illegitimacy, about the problematic impact of generalised step-parenthood, or about the sabotage of parental authority by enemies of the family in all directions (Dennis and Erdos, 1992). Nor do I need, I imagine, to emphasise the crucial role played by properly functioning families in civilizing children’s natural barbarity, and in socialising them to the disciplines and ambitions of the world of work (Dennis, 1993).

Instead I will content myself with describing some of the results of a recent large-scale nation-wide survey on morals and morality, in which I was involved, commissioned by the *Daily Express* from ICM (March, 1994).

The family is where, if anywhere, morals are learned, and where, therefore, the necessary psychological infrastructure of freedom is laid down. What do the British feel about its role?

Only 40% apparently believe that marriage is for life regardless, while slightly more, at 42%, feel you should stay married only as long as you love the other person. Nearly a fifth — an extraordinarily high proportion, I think — say that marriage is out of date and living together is just as good. The youngest age group 18-24 are nearly twice as likely as 35-50 year olds to take this “realistic” or “cynical” view of marriage.

In the same vein, less than a third of the sample believe that parents of children should be married, and nearly a quarter believe that marriage is “not at all necessary” for parents of children. These are patently disastrous trends in attitudes as far as the survival and strength of the family is concerned.

In this context, it might seem encouraging that a majority — if only of 63% — believe it is very important for a child to have mum living at home with them. But this relatively positive finding is more than somewhat diminished by the fact that less than half, at only 42%, think it is very important for dad to be there too!

Family structure aside, there seems to be a considerable weakening in the extent of guidance and control which parents exert. Barely half of parents check that their children

have done their homework. Not many more than this claim to listen to them reading when they are young and learning. And only about four in ten control their television viewing — barely a quarter in social classes D and E. Less than half of all parents apparently insist on a set bed-time for young children.

Despite long-standing criticisms by southern Europeans and Asians, with their very different assumptions and structures, of British attitudes to the family, this precious institution has for many hundreds of years been a central value-focus of British culture, disseminated throughout all levels of society. It does now seem to be in a state of incipient decay.

We seem intent on making divorce ever easier. We seem, if we may judge from the Children Act of 1989 — a reform, extraordinarily enough, introduced not by communitarian hippies of the left but by a Conservative Government — to be as overattentive to rights and as neglectful of duties as ever we were in the long destructive years of the nineteen sixties (Ryan, 1994).

Indeed, as the ongoing debacle over the Child Support Agency farcically demonstrates, we seem incapable of attempting rational family reform without blundering into ever sillier problems. Worst of all, we seem quite hopeless at addressing the issue of the so-called one-parent family — a wonderful contradiction in terms — and of reforming the welfare provisions which are normalising mother-only households as a successfully competitive alternative to real families (Marsland, 1995).

Apparently we have to rely on a Democratic President of the United States for honesty about young lone parents and welfare. “We will say to teenagers”, Mr Clinton said recently, “if you have a child out of wedlock, we will no longer give you a cheque to set up a separate household ... We want families to stay together ... People who bring children into the world cannot and must not walk away from them.”

Britain, by contrast, has become so much a haven of fraudulent welfare-speak that even allegedly right-wing Ministers respond to the shameless, bitchy demands of Lone Parents Incorporated in the fawning, honeyed tones of ideological surrender. In yielding thus cravenly to the campaigning bluster of collectivist ideologues, we are denying common-sense, betraying rational political principles, and subverting the family.

Young lone parents need a home: but they are better off in a supervised institution in the countryside than in a flat of their own in the inner city. They need money: but the father of their child or children should be paying up, as should their current boyfriends — who trade in their tens of thousands on the credulity of social workers to obtain free lodging. They need above all wise adult support and training: but of this we provide, out of deference to their spurious rights, almost nothing.

The family, then, like the work ethic, is under threat by the enemies of freedom. The saboteurs of Samuel Smiles’s spirit of self-disciplined effort, like the wreckers of the traditional family — referred to contemptuously in a new sociology text-book as “the cereal packet family” — are enemies of the British people, and we should fight them hard.

## DEFENDING BRITAIN

It is no easy matter, however, in the social and cultural circumstances prevailing today to defend our country and its values effectively. Britain's strength, confidence, and reputation are not what they used to be. It is after all less than twenty years since under Margaret Thatcher's leadership we began to tackle our problems seriously. Before that — under Conservative and Labour Governments alike — the British people had been encouraged ever since the end of the Second World War to sweep all our difficulties under the carpet, and to hope blindly for the best:

We allowed the Trade Unions and ignorant shop stewards to ruin industry with their lunatic strikes, and to multiply unemployment with their childish rules and neurotic anxieties.

We let the Welfare State destroy our traditional commitment to hard work and our natural aptitude for enterprise.

We looked on idly while professorial princes of impracticality sabotaged the best education system in the world with their nonsensical theories.

We did nothing to stem the decay of the family, or to resist the mischievous forces — among feminists, in the gay lobby, and in the swollen ranks of utopian socialists — intent on destroying it.

We chattered aimlessly about the supposedly irreversible socialist trend of history, while the most precious values of our civilisation were mocked and subverted by influential fools and knaves among our academics, clerics, artists, and journalists.

Little wonder if there was much to be done from 1979 on by way of cultural repair work, considering the blitzed condition in which years of neglect and destruction had left the country. And we have not done badly in our efforts to date to turn the tide of national decline and decadence.

## BRITISH RENEWAL

The old habits of cowardly cultural and political appeasement have not yet been thrown off completely. Lingering obeisance to "pragmatism" and "consensus" has ensured that opportunities — for radical, once-for-all reform of the Welfare State, for breaking the power of the white collar trade unions in the public sector — have been foolishly wasted, and that challenges — by Chinese arrogance in relation to Hong Kong, and by the Labour Party and the media on the issue of who governs — have been needlessly evaded.

The process of national renewal has at least, however, been firmly entered upon. The Belgrano was sunk and so was Scargill. The British role in the defeat of communism was honourable and considerable. Euro-socialism is in our targets. A number of important concrete victories have been won.

For example, the economy has been put on a sound footing — with the crucial role of competition and the market widely acknowledged at last, the importance of individual initiative and effort recognised, and inflation firmly under control. Again, we have retrieved at least a little of our old pride in ourselves as a people, and something of our reputation in the world for straight dealing and vigour.

We have, moreover, set about fundamental reforms of education, health care, welfare, and the penal system which had been blocked for years by know-all nihilists among the intelligentsia and in the communications industries. The British people is back on track at last after decades of self-inflicted malaise and self-indulgent, socially engineered national failure.

We cannot sustain this winning streak, however, unless we acknowledge explicitly our special British values, and defend them with resolution. Central to our national culture are the two values I have examined here — the work ethic and commitment to the family.

We should not pander to politicians and journalists who sneer dismissively at high rewards meritoriously earned by the enterprising initiative of our best industrial managers. The politics of envy is an alien, un-British importation — or how could we have ever initiated the Industrial Revolution, and driven it through to success while France, Germany, and the United States, let alone Japan, were still backward and grossly underdeveloped societies? Nor should we proffer the least sympathy to those among the unemployed who prefer to stew in their own idle ignorance and to take their benefits as of right instead of making an effort to prepare themselves for employment, to look persistently for work, and to buckle down to hard grind at a modest job for modest payment. Any such sentimentality would be lethal to the successful maintenance of the work ethic.

Nor, in the realm of family values, should we tolerate the constant sniping - in the media and in the schools — at marriage, or the tireless celebration of deviant patterns of relationship, however bizarre. We should challenge a tax and benefit structure which systematically penalizes those who marry, stay married, and rear their children conscientiously (Morgan, 1995). The family must be defended.

The core values of the work ethic, family commitment, self-reliance, honesty, enterprising initiative, curiosity, and tolerance are, in their synergetic combination in the British culture in its totality, what makes us British. These values are, together with the institutions which they underpin, the source of our liberty. Libertarians more even than most people, therefore, should join actively in the defence of British values against those who traduce and subvert them.

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