

St Augustine's Centre, Halifax

English for Life in the UK

November 2020

Season 2 - Episode 1 : Values and Principles of British Society

Mark Well - hello, Christine - how are you?

Christine Oh, hi, Mark - - I'm not bad, not bad yeah, thank you. It's quite a nice day. It was a very wet day, this morning - I went for a walk and got properly wet, but now I'm sitting at home, and feeling quite cosy. What about you? How are you?

Mark Well, I've had a cold - it's been ... a heavy cold really. I've had it over the last - more than a week now - so I'm feeling OK, but not at my complete best, so my voice might be a little bit croaky¹ today, but I expect we'll manage.

Christine I think we will.

(Music)

Mark Well, welcome everyone. This is the podcast **English for Life in the UK**. This is for those of you who want to improve your English and at the same time learn more about life in this country. And - what are we doing today, then, Christine?

Christine Well - we're doing one of the very first things that are at the top of the Citizenship Test - or *The Life in the UK* study² - called **The Values and Principles of the UK**.

Mark So - important stuff. Some difficult language in it, I think - so don't worry, listeners, if you don't understand everything on the first run through. We'll do our best to talk things through with you, and have a discussion about some of these important values and principles. So the Government Handbook starts by saying that British society is founded on a number of fundamental values and principles. So, it's basically saying these things are important to our society. You can say: they underpin our way of life; that is, they support, they are the basis of our way of life.

Christine So, Mark - what are those fundamental principles of British life, that are mentioned in the Guide?

Mark Well, there's five of them, Christine - they are:

¹ croaky - a usual word to indicate throat or voice problems: 'croak' is the sound of a frog

² Life in the United Kingdom: Official Study Guide, published by tso and available in most libraries

democracy
the rule of law
individual liberty
tolerance

and

participation in community life

Christine Ah ha - so would you like to say a bit more about that? What's "**democracy**"?

Mark Well - I guess democracy, at its heart, is about citizens being allowed to choose their government through elections, through a fair system of voting. I think it also needs to include the ability of people - freedom of speech - so people can say what it is they stand for and what they want. You probably have to have a reasonably free press - the media - so that ideas can be put over to the citizens, and exchanged. People can debate things in that way. Erm ... but essentially, it's ... that's what it's about: it's about citizens being able to choose and **hold to account**, their government.

(3 minutes:45 seconds)

Christine And the next one is the "**rule of law**". What would you say that meant?

Mark OK - so this is, I guess, first of all, having a system by which laws are made in a fair and agreed way, in our country. It's Parliament that makes the laws and then, once those laws have been approved, that citizens have to obey those laws: that rule of law and if they don't, there is a system by which people can be tried in a court of law and decide whether or not they have actually obeyed the law or not.

Christine Yes - so fair trials and punishments, if people don't obey the law.

Mark Yes.

Christine So the next one is **individual liberty** - what's that?

Mark Yes - I mentioned this in a sense as part of democracy, because I think it is important people are free to express their views and, to some extent, to live their life in a way they choose to. Certainly, as opposed to some countries where ... which are ... you might call oppressive countries - countries, where actually, there are a lot of things you are not allowed to do, but this always has to be "within the law", so it goes back to that "rule of law" idea, as well. And the other thing about individual liberty is that there have to be limits on it, because what you can't do, is say that people can do things which then end up harming other people, or restricting other peoples' freedoms.

Christine Hmm. And so the next one was **tolerance**.

- Mark Yeah - tolerance: I think people will understand what that is about. The ones ... the things that are mentioned, specifically, in the Guide, is tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. So, that's about accepting that there are people who will have different religious beliefs, different political beliefs, different ways of wanting to lead their lives and that British society is tolerant of those, those differences.
- Christine And then - the last one? "**Participation in community life**"?
- Mark Well, that's about citizens getting involved in their local communities. Part of that will be through voting at local level, but it's also volunteering, joining together. The charity that you and I work for, for example, Christine: you could say, couldn't you, as part of ... we are participating in our local community, by being involved as volunteers, in that charity. So, I think that's broadly the idea behind that.
- Christine Well - they seem fairly straightforward, but what difficulties do you see any problems in there, Mark?
- Mark Well, I suppose they are big ideas and British society is not perfect, in any of those. It's almost certainly a lot better than many countries where many of the people we work with regularly, come from, because they have fled from those countries because of oppression, because of a lack of freedom, a lack of democracy, as well as - in some cases - economic reasons, as well. But I would say, there are things in this country where we need to keep working at these things. So, as an example, our democratic system: I mean, there are some people who would say 'well, our system of voting - the way we vote - is rather limiting, in that we end up, in most cases, with a government that comes from either one of only two political parties' - that's in England.
- Christine So - the smaller parties, the minority views are rarely represented in Government.
- Mark That, I think, is one of the challenges and it's interesting, that some of the devolved Governments - that is, the Governments in the separate countries: that's Wales, and Scotland, and Northern Ireland - they have different systems of election to those - so that is a debate, if you like, I guess.
- Christine And, of course, as well as the House of Commons, with the Members of Parliament, who are elected, there is another Chamber, Government Chamber: the House of Lords. And those people are mainly appointed, they are not elected.
- Mark Appointed - or indeed, there are still some who get their place there, simply by having been born into that family.

- Christine Obviously, they don't have the same power as the House of Commons and they do a play a part in governing the Country.
- What about **individual liberty**?
- Mark Well I think the question there really is about how do you decide what the limitations are? And - there will be differences of view about - and certainly we have introduced limitations and many of the laws of the land do limit our freedoms, because, they say, you are not, for example, allowed to deliberately discriminate and infringe against certain other peoples' rights, in the way in which you act. So, I think there are the debate is about where the limit of that individual liberty, because it isn't complete - you are not completely free to act in the way that you want to.
- Christine And then - the "**tolerance**" ...
- Mark Yes - I think you're not .. you were saying to me that you're not entirely comfortable with the word "tolerance".
- Christine No, I was saying that. It just seems to be such a low target! Normally, you would use that word "tolerate" - "Can you you tolerate that nasty smell?" - it means 'putting up with something' you don't like. I think that is a very low bar to set people and yet, it's held up as an aim.
- Mark What would you ... is there something you'd add to it? or change the wording?
- (11:00)
- Christine I think "respect" is an important element there: respect for those of different faiths and beliefs - it's not just tolerance that we want.
- Mark Yes - I would agree - I would agree. That maybe brings in (a certainly) one other area that is missing from that list - there's nothing there about equality - there's nothing about equality of opportunity - and I would say that is a fundamental part of our British society and that's much more than tolerating difference; that's actually saying: there needs to be equality of opportunity, whatever peoples' background and circumstances.
- Christine And in law - British institutions and all organisations - have a duty to promote good relations between different faiths, people of different faiths - different communities and so on, and that's not mentioned there.
- Another thing that surprises me or disappoints me is that there's not mention of human rights. I mean, this is an understanding that's a global understanding ratified by the UN³, what human rights are, and British society does respect human rights, but for some

³ UN = United Nations organisation

reason, they're talking about the fundamental principles of British life and they don't mention them. I mean: human life - are things like the right to life - your right to respect for private and family life, your right to a fair trial, your right not to be tortured. Those things which are universally acknowledged to be human rights, are not mentioned. But instead, they've picked out these five, five elements, and saying they're fundamental principles of British life. They're not really very different from many other countries in the world - the same fundamental principles.

Mark Certainly, I would agree. Certainly, I would not say these are, in any sense, unique to Britain. And indeed, not unique to the Western world, either. You will find these as important rights, in a number of countries.

Christine And the last one?

Mark Participation? I would suppose again, there, the question would be - 'How limited is that participation?' Are there enough opportunities for people to participate at a local level, in their community? Does everybody have access to the resources at a local level to enable them to do that? Certainly, I think, part of our role that we play, is trying to help people, so that they are in a position where they can participate actively in their local community and sadly, I think there are some people who at the moment are very much, kind of, *on the fringes* and don't really get engaged - probably, don't know how to get engaged, with their local communities.

I think the other thing I'd want to say, linked to this idea of participation, is the idea of actually people working together on things - doing things together. So, we've got in these values, individual liberty - but, I think, as important, if not more important, as a value and principle of our society, is about us sharing things: doing things in partnership, doing things together. There's a word not used very often, we might say "collectivism". It means coming together, to do things: I'm thinking of things like the origins of the trade union movement in this country, for example, or social groupings of various sorts. Certainly, in the work we do, Christine - you and I - with St Augustine's, we very much do that in partnership with other organisations and we do it together, together with the people who are there who we're trying to help. So I would say that's an important, additional, value that I'd like to suggest.

Christine I think I agree with you, Mark. That is something that's very common, in this country. I mean people are "joiner-inners"- they get together, to do things. It's interesting, I mean - these fundamental principles of British life: I expect, if you went to ask people in the

world - including in this country - what they think of as the fundamental principles of British life, they'd say things like - 'queuing' - respecting a queue - or 'not make a fuss' - let's not make a fuss what else?

Mark Or being polite - saying 'please' and 'thank you'.

Christine Yes - Yes!

Mark I suppose the argument would be, those are not fundamental principles and values. I think they are a part I suppose you might say 'the culture of British society'.

Christine Yes.

Mark OK. I think that's very interesting - thank you, Christine. And, we hope listeners will have found that useful.

(Music) (17:24)

Language Support

Mark This is the part of the podcast where I choose a few of the phrases used in this episode and explain them in a little more detail and talk a bit about the language we've used. So I'm going to start with two or three phrases that we've used, just to make sure people have understood them.

At one point, we talked about needing "to hold to account" the government - that's part of democracy - "**to hold the government to account**". Now, to hold somebody to account for something means to make sure they do what they've agreed to do. So, in the case of a government: at an election time, they will say this is what we're promising, or planning to do, and then, its citizens will be able to hold that government to account - "did they do what they said they were going to do?" - and that might then influence them, whether they would support that government, next time around.

Second phrase that I thought might be useful, was - when we were talking about participation, we said there were some people who were on the "**fringes of society**". To be on the fringe of something, is to be 'on the edge' - a fringe is usually the edge of a piece of material - but you can talk about being on the fringe, on the edge of society, so those are those people who aren't really fully involved or fully engaged: they're on the edge, on the fringe.

Finally, I thought it might be helpful just to reflect on some of the phrases that Christine and I used when we were discussing difficult ideas and we wanted to express a view, but we weren't absolutely certain, or we recognised there were people who would take a

different view. And we used a number of different ways of saying that - so amongst those was:

"I suppose the argument would be" - I suppose the argument would be - so that's saying 'somebody else might argue', might want to express this particular opinion - but I'm not sure about that, so I say, "I suppose".

Another one is 'it just seems to be' - and that "seems to be" - is another way of expressing a certain amount of uncertainty.

Another point we said: "they seem fairly certain" - fairly - "seem fairly" again - there's that.

And then, one more, I picked out, was "this, I guess, is about" - that's a phrase I used. And when you "guess", normally, you're kind of, not at all sure and you're just hoping you might be right, but, in this case, when I say "I guess", "this, I guess, is about ..." - I'm fairly sure - I think, I'm pretty sure, this is right - but I'm not absolutely sure - so I say "I guess" .

So those are just a few examples of fairly commonly used ways in every day conversation, when you're not absolutely sure about something.

(Music) (21:35)

That's it for today. Thank you very much joining us. I hope you found it useful. A reminder that you can get the written transcript for this episode - it will appear in a few days' time on our website. That's

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

There you will also find links to all the previous episodes. And you can also contact us through our email address, which is:

englishforlifeintheuk@gmail.com

So that's it for this week. Take care of yourselves and keep practising your English. Bye for now.

(Music)

(22:43) ends.