

# As the case for patriotism has not been decisively made, we have no business promoting it in schools

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*Michael Gove wants schools to promote patriotism by putting British history 'at the heart of a revived National Curriculum'. But can this educational aim be justified? [Michael Hand](#) finds that while there are practical benefits to promoting patriotism, it is by no means the only way to motivate citizens to do their 'civic duty'. There is no need for schools to cultivate patriotism in children.*



The idea that schools should cultivate patriotism in children has been high on the political agenda over the last few years. Shortly after the discovery that the 7/7 terrorist attacks were perpetrated by British citizens, [Gordon Brown](#) called for the construction of 'a strong modern sense of patriotism', to be achieved in part by a history curriculum centred on the British national story. In 2008, the [Goldsmith Report](#) advocated the introduction of citizenship ceremonies for all British young people, affording 'an opportunity to express pride and to reinforce belonging' and incorporating 'the Oath of Allegiance to the Queen and the Pledge of Commitment to the UK'. And in 2009, [Michael Gove](#) promised that the next Conservative Government would build 'a modern, inclusive patriotism' by 'teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements'. Are politicians right to charge schools with delivering a patriotic citizenry? Is love of country a defensible aim of education?

One familiar worry about patriotic education is what [Harry Brighouse](#) calls 'the distortion problem', according to which any attempt to persuade pupils to love a country is likely to involve misrepresenting it. It may be true that most efforts to promote patriotism in schools the world over have been, and continue to be, severely compromised by their reliance on the perpetuation of national myths, fantasies and falsehoods. But this worry doesn't seem decisive. For if patriotism is a significant good, we presumably have reason to make fairly strenuous efforts to solve the distortion problem before we surrender to it. Few take the view that believing falsehoods about a country is a necessary condition of loving it, so perhaps we can find ways of promoting patriotism in schools that don't involve peddling national myths.

A more basic worry is whether it's true that patriotism is a significant good. Is there a sound normative justification for being patriotic? If there is, it should be possible for schools to promote patriotism by helping children grasp this justification, and without recourse to a 'noble, moralizing history'. But if there isn't, it's hard to see how any attempt to cultivate patriotism in schools could be educationally defensible.

Patriotism is love of one's country, and is therefore a form of emotional attachment. It makes sense to talk about reasons for being (or not being) patriotic because it makes sense to talk about reasons for having (or not having) particular emotions. To a large extent, of course, emotions are things that happen to us, things we suffer or experience or undergo; but we are not wholly at their mercy and, to the extent that we have control over them, we can exercise that control more or less rationally. We can foster, moderate or suppress our emotions on the basis of relevant reasons.

One way of rationally assessing an emotion is by asking whether it fits its object. It is appropriate to fear what is dangerous, to be indignant about what is unfair and to feel compassion for those who suffer; in the absence of danger, unfairness or suffering, these emotions are out of place. Love, however, seems to be unlike other emotions in this respect. There is no general quality that distinguishes the people and things it is appropriate to love from those it is inappropriate to love.

If this is right, it means that one familiar subset of arguments for and against patriotism are wrongheaded. It won't do to defend patriotism by pointing to a country's achievements and virtues, or to attack it by pointing



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to a country's failures and vices. This is analogous to defending one's love for one's children by pointing to their school reports. Just as it's no more rational to love children who do well at school than children who do badly, so it's no more rational to love countries with glorious histories than countries with inglorious ones.

Another way of rationally assessing emotions is by asking about their *practical value*, about whether it is helpful or harmful, beneficial or burdensome, for us to have them. This mode of assessment is as applicable to love as to any other emotion. The considerations that bear on the rationality of patriotism, then, are the practical benefits and drawbacks of loving one's country. At least three such considerations seem to me to carry weight.

First, patriotism is *a spur to civic duty*. At least for those whose countries are liberal democratic sovereign states, a benefit of patriotic attachment is that it supplements the motivation of citizens to do their civic duty. Citizens have a range of obligations to their political community, some of which are fairly onerous and in conflict with their own interests. There is therefore a danger that they will be inadequately motivated to meet these obligations. But if their political community is a national community they love, they are emotionally invested in its flourishing and consequently have a powerful supplementary motive to do what they ought.

Second, patriotism is *a source of pleasure*. Loving one's country is intrinsically valuable because inherently enjoyable. Patriots are people who take pleasure in their national community and the land on which it resides.

Third, patriotism is *an impediment to civic judgment*. A drawback of patriotic attachment, again for those whose countries are liberal democratic sovereign states, is that it impedes citizens in the discharge of their civic duty by clouding their civic judgment. Citizens of democratic states are required to elect governments and hold them to account, to subject to scrutiny the domestic and foreign policies devised and pursued on their behalf, and to vote or protest against such policies as they find to be imprudent or unjust. They can only meet these requirements if they maintain some critical distance from their political representatives and institutions. In the context of nation-states, patriotism works against the preservation of critical distance because the actions of the state are simultaneously the actions of the nation, which patriots are strongly inclined to view in a favourable light. Because patriots delight in their country and want it to flourish, they have a tendency to lose sight of its wrongdoings in their eagerness to celebrate its accomplishments.

These, I think, are the most pertinent considerations. Each carries moderate weight. None is overwhelming: patriotism is not the *only* way of motivating citizens to do their civic duty, or a *necessary* constituent of flourishing lives, and it does not *invariably* result in civic misjudgements. Nor are any of them trivial: we have genuine and significant interests in motivating civic action, in forming loving attachments and in preserving the objectivity of civic judgment. Given this balance of considerations, it must be granted that the question of the desirability of patriotism is an open one. There is no decisive normative argument either for or against loving one's country. And until that changes, schools have no business trying to cultivate patriotism in children.

Michael Hand's IMPACT booklet [Patriotism in Schools](#), is launched today at the Institute for Government.

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