

# Sense of belonging and social cohesion – what comes first?

Integration Foundation conference

November 12th, 2025  
Tallinn, Estonia

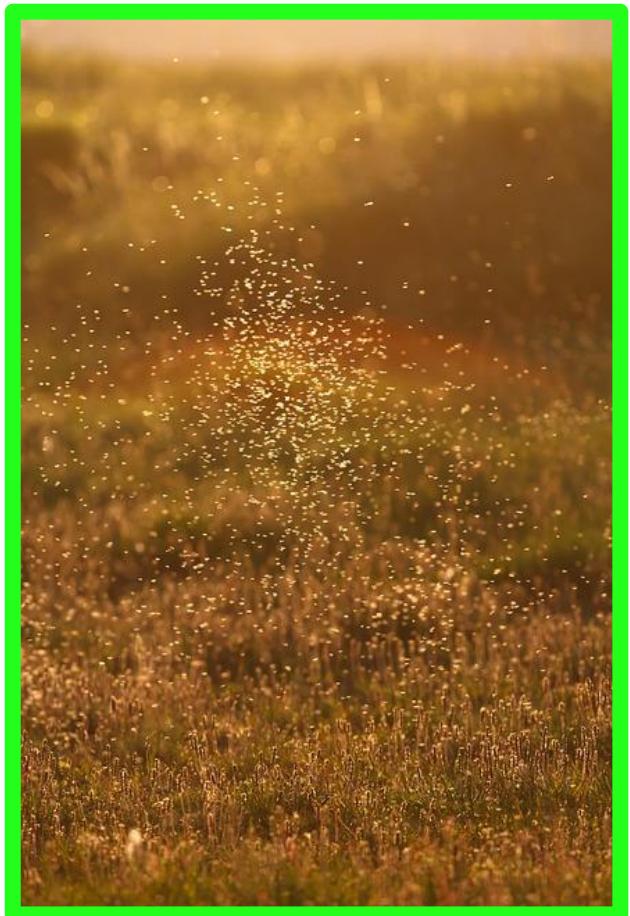
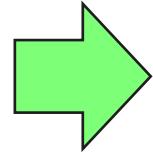
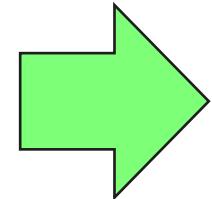
Dr. Anneli Portman  
Finnish Institute for  
Health and Welfare

16/12/2025



How do mosquitoes stay  
in their own group?  
How do they know which  
group they belong to?

Each group  
has a  
unique  
pitch!



# Shared values create boundaries of belonging

- “*In order to belong to us, you need agree **this is an important/good/a worthy goal***”
- **Times of crises** make them more solid and thus less easy to penetrate



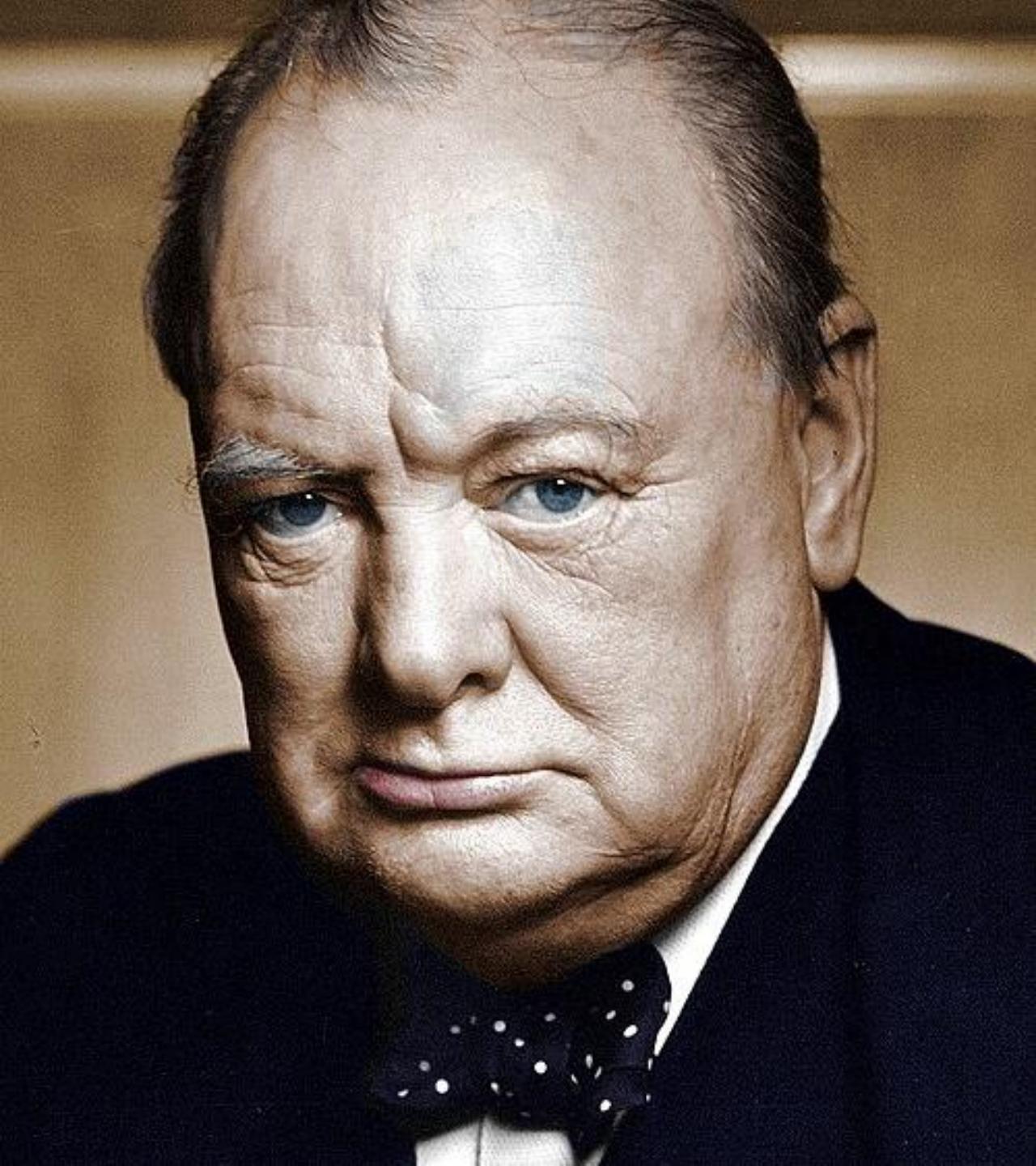
# How do we know what "our" values are?

- Values are made visible through recurring rituals, habits, rhetoric  
= what gets celebrated



# Leaders shape shared values and create cohesion

- Define and embody “us”
- Promote “our” values and interests
- Define societal **threats** and **solutions** to them
  - Who can (is allowed to) solve them?
    - **Boundaries of who can belong**



# Values – links to emotions

- We **like** people who have **similar values** to us...
  - And we assume people we like have similar values to us
- **Breaking/deviating from** shared values makes us **angry**
  - Especially if these are considered sacred, i.e. inviolable values



# In conclusion...

- Who defines who can belong?
  - **We do**, but use our leaders to formulate and express the boundaries of who we are and what we stand for
- Values and emotions are intrinsically linked, as values define what is good, important and worthy
  - We evaluate people's suitability to be part of "us" on the basis of their adherence to our values
- Threats and crises make value cohesion seem more central

A large flock of small, dark birds, likely starlings, is shown in flight against a clear blue sky. The birds are densely packed, forming a dark, swirling mass that fills the frame. They appear to be moving from the left side of the image towards the right, creating a sense of motion.

Birds of a feather  
flock together



# Thank you!

[anneli.portman@thl.fi](mailto:anneli.portman@thl.fi)