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Ditch the suits, Bragg tells MPs



Bragg railed at MPs' dress sense

By Jackie Storer

BBC News Online political staff

Veteran socialist campaigner and songwriter Billy Bragg took a break from his tour of Britain to tell MPs why young people had no interest in politics.

After the initial banter about his first gig being at the Westminster Palace of varieties, Bragg warmed up to point out that even the politicians' dress sense was a turn off to the electorate.

" No disrespect to you all, but I look at you there in your suits and your ties and I'm sitting here in my Clash t-shirt "

Billy Bragg

He claimed that outsiders could not relate to the identities and backgrounds of those who sat on the House of Commons green benches.

The failure of the government to deliver on high profile and highly contentious election pledges such as hunting with dogs made people cynical about political issues, he said.

Street cred

Bragg, a long-time Labour supporter, was called to give evidence to the Commons public administration inquiry into the way in which public appointments are made.

He did not beat about the bush when asked for his views on how to get people enthused about public service.

"No disrespect to you all, but I look at you there in your suits and your ties and I'm sitting here in my Clash t-shirt," he said, lifting up his sweater.

"What I am saying is if I was a Muslim woman and I looked at the body politic as represented through the mainstream media, where would I see myself? I wouldn't see myself there at all."

" I'm not going to be out celebrating the Jubilee this year "

Billy Bragg

Committee chairman Tony Wright had tried to keep his street cred by mentioning tickets to Bragg's gig on Thursday at Shepherd's Bush Empire, but the singer quickly retorted that it was sold out.

Labour's Kevin Brennan, the suited 42-year-old MP for Cardiff West, pointed out that he and 44-year-old Bragg were from the same generation of people who were teenagers during the punk era.

The singer swiftly replied: "You should see my audience. They are all the same age as us, and they don't look like you, mate."

Asked why he had not stood for parliament, Bragg said: "I think the process as it is presently configured makes it difficult for someone like myself whose opinions have a more individual outlook on things to say what I'm going to say.

"I'm not going to be out celebrating the Jubilee this year. If I was a Labour MP that wouldn't be very popular would it?

"I perhaps have more opportunity to speak my mind and make a point by being outside the political process."

Unrepresentative few

He added: "I'm not taking a cynical view that it's not worth it. I would encourage anybody who wants to do that to take part and participate.

"But from my point of view, if I was a Labour MP, it's hard enough as it is getting played on Radio 2."

The long-time Labour supporter also called for a reformed Lords to include more people, such as nurses, teachers and social activists, picked for their prominence in the regions, rather than because of their position in the political party.

He criticised last year's selection of "people's peers" as an example of how Westminster concentrated power in the hands of an unrepresentative few.

" I was a punk rocker and therefore, I believed in an anarchist kind of haircut "

Billy Bragg

There was an outcry last April when the 15 "ordinary people" selected by a commission chaired by Lord Stevenson of Coddendam from more than 3,000 applicants, to join the Lords, included seven knights and three professors.

Bragg argued: "If we could reform the House of Lords in a way that included people from outside the Westminster circle, that would send an immediate message to the electorate that the present reform programme is about bringing people in from the outside."

He said: "The people that we want on those benches are the kind of people that Lord Wakeham and Lord Stevenson never ever meet."

Abstention

Bragg shamefully admitted that despite his political leanings, he had not voted when he was first able to at the age of 20 in 1979.

"Part of the reason for that was because I was a punk rocker and therefore, I believed in an anarchist kind of haircut," he said.

"I really couldn't discern any difference between Jim Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher. How stupid can you be?"

"That experience, that somebody as politically engaged as me, even then, I felt it was a badge of my honour that I wasn't going to take part in this charade because how could these old people have any affect on my life?"

"I think that experience is a common experience among young people."

But with all those sobering thoughts to consider, the singer managed to leave on a high note, shamelessly plugging his new album, *England, Half English*.

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