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RECLAIM OUR FLAG

By Billy Bragg

OUTSPOKEN singer/ songwriter Billy Bragg has released a controversial record protesting against the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations.

His single, Take Down The Union Jack, questions what the monarchy stands for and urges people to look again at their own national identity.

Here, Billy Bragg explains what the difference for him is between being British and being English - and why he's concerned that racists, bullies and thugs are hijacking the patriotic cause.

WHEN you walk down the street at the moment you'll see flags everywhere - in homes, in cars and in shop and pub windows.

World Cup fever and the Queen's Golden Jubilee have triggered a wave of patriotic fervour in England, with both the Union Jack and the flag of St George both proudly displayed.

Yet what these flags symbolise are two separate identities. The England football team represent the country as it is - vibrant, multicultural and forward looking.

The Union Jack always seems to be in the hands of those who wish to look back to our imperial past.

So it seems a good time to ask if the future is British... or English, Scottish and Welsh?

Have you noticed how the Scots and Welsh teams no longer sing God Save The Queen at sporting events? How come we English are still stuck with the British national anthem?

On the 2001 Census forms, did you notice that there was no box to tick that said English? The Scots and Welsh could tick their own boxes, despite having British passports as we do, yet, for the English, the only options were British or Other. Clearly, the Government believes that there is a difference between being British and being Welsh or Scots - so why not English?

We also seem happy for our neighbours to be patriotic and celebrate their culture, history and identity but it seems we get squeamish when it comes to expressing our own.

All too often we associate pride in England with the worst elements - extreme nationalism, racism and football thuggery. Yet we only have ourselves to blame for this state of affairs.

Our belief in a multicultural society has created a void where

Englishness should be, which has made it easy for the boot-boys and the Far-Right to hijack our national symbols.

However, I'd argue that you cannot have multiculturalism without Englishness, and vice versa. For example, Nasser Hussain is a great cricketer - yet if there wasn't an English cricket team for him to captain, he wouldn't have become a symbol of our multicultural society.

We need to create an inclusive sense of identity, based on where you are, rather than where your parents or grandparents come from.

You may ask why not choose the British identity with which to face the future? I believe that it is an identity that will always be associated with our imperial past.

TO my mind, British culture identifies too strongly with the monarchy, the Union Jack and the Empire. That narrow definition is mirrored in the Royal Family itself.

Compare it to the England you see out there representing us in the World Cup. Which group best reflects the make-up of our country?

Should we abolish the monarchy to make way for this new England? The Queen, as a person, has real significance to the generation who fought the Second World War and I believe we owe a debt of thanks to the families of those who died for King and country in the fight against fascism.

Abolition of the monarchy would suggest that we no longer care about their sacrifice.

Instead, I believe in a multicultural society that has room for monarchists as well as anarchists - and all of the other traditions that make up our national fabric. I'm not a republican but I believe the monarchy must undergo thorough reform if it hopes to survive another 50 years. For instance, there is no reason why the monarch shouldn't pay tax and duties on all her personal wealth the same as you or I.

The trouble is that no one is really sure how much the Queen is worth. Which treasures does she hold in trust for the nation and which things are hers privately?

Take the massive Royal Collections. The Queen has the largest art collection in the world but it is kept in the palaces, away from public view. Although we pay for its upkeep, we are never allowed to see these works.

A self-financing monarchy would also be a welcome improvement. While we pay the Queen for her duties, we also pick up the bill for her staff - every footman, servant, secretary, guardsman, cleaner and Lord Lieutenant.

Meanwhile, every other 76-year-old has to get by on a State pension no longer linked to the cost of living.

A further reform, which should find wide support even among supporters of the monarchy, would be the abolition of what is

known as the powers of Royal Prerogative.

These are powers that the Prime Minister has inherited from the monarch which allow him (or her) to act without first consulting parliament.

These include the right to declare war, to sign treaties, to appoint ministers and distribute honours. Our unwritten constitution would have us believe that all of these powers are wielded by the Queen herself, yet we all know that it is the PM who is pulling the strings.

ROYAL Prerogative powers allow him or her to exploit this ancient loophole in our democracy, in order to avoid being held accountable by parliament.

Whatever I may personally feel, the debate about the monarchy as an institution is dominated by the person who currently wears the crown.

Because of her long reign, the Queen is seen by many as a comforting presence, having been there all their lives. Many cannot imagine there ever being anyone else's head on our stamps and coins.

While this makes Elizabeth II secure in her role, it presents a real problem for her successor. I doubt we will be able to initiate any real changes to the institution of the monarchy until the time comes for Prince Charles to take the throne.

By then, countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada may have loosened their ties with Britain to the extent that the monarch is no longer their head of state.

Even in Britain, old identities are being renewed. Might Scotland become independent? Would the Welsh follow? Should the English have their own parliament? How should the monarchy respond to these changes?

Despite the current buzz of activity, the royals are losing their ability to enthral us - in 1977 the Queen did not have to stage a pop concert in her back yard to get our attention.

Taking down the Union Jack means putting the monarchy into its proper perspective in 21st century England.

Billy Bragg's new single, Take Down The Union Jack, is available now, as is his new album, England, Half-English.

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