



Take two

## George on our mind

The English need to celebrate St George's Day, says Billy Bragg, while Martin Linton is glad that the day passes virtually unnoticed

**Martin Linton and Billy Bragg**

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**The Guardian**

**Dear Martin,**

Why is it that St George's Day makes us feel awkward? What is it about being English that stops us from marking the day with some communal expression? I don't mean an overt celebration such as the Irish community have on St Patrick's Day. I was thinking of something along the lines of the way we celebrate Easter. We know that it is a Christian festival, but few of us bother actually going to church. As Mel Gibson recently reminded us, the detail of what happened at Easter is still a cause of much controversy, yet most of us feel able to take part in a communal celebration of the event. Few people think of the Crucifixion when saying Happy Easter and passing out the chocolate eggs. Do you think it is possible, even desirable, for the English community to find a similar way of celebrating itself, one that is outgoing and friendly, rather than being inward-looking and hostile?

**Billy**

**Dear Billy,**

I wouldn't say I feel awkward about St George's Day. I don't feel an urge to wear a rose in my buttonhole or a bowler hat with an England flag on it or to sing patriotic songs. It probably does cross my mind, even before I read the papers, that it is our national saint's day. But if there is one thing I think we should celebrate about Englishness it is that we don't make a big song and dance about it. I like that. I like the fact that English people tend to be a little understated. I see what you mean about Easter, but what would you have us do? Present our children with little chocolate dragons?

**Yours, Martin**

**Dear Martin,**

No big songs and definitely no English country dancing. I don't expect anybody to have to wear "national costume", whatever that might be. But I do worry that our reticence about St George's Day is symptomatic of a refusal by the left to engage with notions of Englishness. This creates a vacuum, allowing the reactionary right to define who is and isn't English. Whether we feel comfortable with it or not, issues like immigration and our relationship with Europe have put nationalism back on the agenda. Isn't it time that we started to reclaim this part of our multi-layered identity by making a case for an English community capable of embracing everyone who lives in England? I think St George's Day offers us a chance to begin the process of giving voice to that sense of who we are.

**Regards, Billy**

**Dear Billy,**

You have a point when it comes to songs. I feel uncomfortable with the words of most of our national songs, from the painfully imperialistic Land of Hope and Glory to the blindly patriotic I Vow To Thee My Country. I believe Elgar and Holst wisely disowned them. But there is nothing inherently rightwing about nationalism. In some countries, where the left led the battle for independence, it is the left that drapes itself in the national flag. That is true in many of our former colonies as well as some European countries such as Ireland and Norway. It is not the same in England. England has not been a nation state for 300 years. It does not aspire to be. No one, save a few mavericks, wants to "liberate" England from the United Kingdom. English nationalism is a redundant concept.

What the left sometimes fails to recognise is that Englishness is an important cultural, linguistic and sporting identity. We should never cede that territory to the right. But I associate national days with countries that are, or aspire to be, nation states. In England we would do better to celebrate April 23 as Shakespeare's birthday. I

would have thought that would appeal to the Bard of Barking.

**Yours, Martin**

**Dear Martin,**

I think you'd be surprised how many people out there want to "liberate" England from the European Union. Far from being a redundant concept, English nationalism is gaining ground amongst those who feel that devolution is an EU-inspired plot. Scratch the surface of the United Kingdom Independence party and you'll find a bunch of people whose main concern is to preserve the primacy of England's role within the UK. Some commentators in the rightwing press have even begun to make the case for England going it alone, should Scotland and Wales decide that their best interests lie within the EU rather than the UK. If that should happen, if Scotland and Wales became independent, then, like it or not, England would be independent too. With that in mind, don't you think that it might be prudent to start to chip away at the prejudices of these Little Englanders by making the case for an inclusive English identity?

**Regards, Billy**

**Dear Billy,**

We're in no danger of losing our primacy. We're 85% of the population of the UK. We don't need to prove anything. That's why there are Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalists in the UK parliament, but no English nationalists. But there's a danger in that. English nationalism may be a politically redundant concept, but it's a plausible one and can be used as a receptacle for all kinds of resentments, some justified, some just plain ugly. What politicians should do is to deal with any justified resentments the English may have, but not to pretend that the UK is a conspiracy against the English. The UK is roughly as big in the EU as Scotland is in the UK (ie about 10-15%). So one can compare the role of the UKIP in European elections to the role of the SNP in Westminster, ie they are basically a spittoon for people who hate the system. It's our job to raise people's sights and persuade them that they have more to gain than to lose from being a member of a bigger family.

I've never actually met a Little Englander, but when I do, I'll point out that England isn't little. It's got a huge population. It dominates the UK. It's a big fish in the European pond. What is their problem?

The UKIP wants "independence outside Europe" but the SNP wants "independence within Europe". The irony is that if Scotland really did become independent, the EU probably wouldn't have them. And if they did have them, the Scots would probably find they got a worse deal than they did in the UK.

**Cheers, Martin.**

**Dear Martin,**

You've never met a Little Englander? I suggest you read the anti-German comments attributed to Richard Desmond this week. His xenophobic outburst typifies the playground nationalism that informs their view of the world and England's place in it. Desmond is doing exactly what you feared, using English nationalism as a vehicle for his own resentment. The debate on the European constitution is going to be disfigured by this kind of Germanophobia, which views Europe through the prism of the Second World War. Here's my suggestion. We declare a public holiday on the Friday before the May Day bank holiday - let's call it Shakespeare Day. The nationalists can fly the St George's flag whilst we spend the day celebrating the diversity of the English community. On the Monday, we can fly our red flag and the English nationalists can go morris dancing. On the weekend in between we can agree to differ whilst enjoying the spring weather.

**All the best, Billy**

**Dear Billy,**

English nationalism has been used as a cloak of respectability by assorted bigots, fascists and racists. Can we stop them doing this by occupying that territory ourselves? I doubt it. Even the fascists have realised that English nationalism is a politically vacuous concept and have adopted the name "British National Party". If we started waving the flag for English nationalism, people might just see it as opportunistic.

On the other hand, there is a very strong streak of anti-Europeanism running through our political life. It's evident in other countries too and has developed into a monster that will make it difficult, if not impossible, to carry out the reforms the EU needs. However this is a problem of British anti-Europeanism, not English nationalism.

I think we can agree that we should stop being sniffy about Englishness as a cultural identity. I visited a local school yesterday. Year five were busy drawing dragons while year six were doing their own version of Romeo and Juliet. Lots of pubs are doing a St George's Day beer festival and Hornchurch, home of the ultra-patriotic Tory MP Andrew Rosindell, is having a St George's Day street party. So, yes, don't let the Rosindells of this world have the franchise on St George. Let's all have a share of the fun.

## **See you, Martin**

. Martin Linton is Labour MP for Battersea, in London. Billy Bragg is a singer/songwriter and activist; his latest album is entitled England, Half English

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