

## Bragg rails against the state of England


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Billy Bragg famously sang "I don't want to change the world" on his hit A New England and now, some 20 years after the song's rise on the charts, the politically minded folk balladeer is changing his tune.

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Bragg is looking for a New England. His forthcoming book, out in October, is called *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging* (Bantam Press) and deals with English identity in the 21st century, a theme he began exploring in 2002 with his album *England, Half-English*.

"The questions I was asking, and the issues I was addressing, weren't resolved with that album," Bragg, who turns 49 this year, said by phone from his Barking, Essex home. "Who does and who doesn't belong in England these days?"

That is the central question, and Bragg's polemic weaves in a personal narrative, much like his story-songs of the past 20 years. In the mid-'80s and early '90s, Bragg had a handful of hits and well-known anthems, like *Sexuality*, *Greetings to the New Brunette* and *Levi Stubbs' Tears*, that poetically fused issues of British politics and young marriage.

In 1998, Bragg released *Mermaid Avenue* with alt-country luminaries Wilco, putting Woody Guthrie lyrics to new music; then came *England, Half English*, his 10th album, and a 2003 career retrospective called *Must I Paint You a Picture?*

While Bragg's writings have appeared in British newspapers and magazines, *The Progressive Patriot* is his first book, inspired by the after-events of the July 2005 London subway bombings. In May of this year, the far-right, anti-immigration British National Party won 12 seats on the Barking and Dagenham council, and that was too close to home for Bragg.

Barking has been home to the Bragg family for generations. (The town's archives contain a 1903 photo of great-grandfather Frederick, in true Bragg form, having an altercation with a police officer.)

Bragg, a flag-waver for tolerance and diversity, says the BNP victory in his hometown was, in part, a reaction to the subway bombings by a group of British-born Muslims that killed 52 people and injured more. Barking, once a white, working-class neighbourhood where people had a job for life at the local car factory, has seen more people from different backgrounds settling in the east London borough.

"People in the BNP are exploiting this and blaming the immigrants who are coming over for the job loss," says Bragg. "There's a majoritarian angst;

people don't feel secure. People who are fearful of the future are bothered by the speed of change and the way change seems to have sped up in the last decade."

In that whirlwind of economics, nationhood, race and identity, people are losing sight of what it means to be British, and Bragg wants to put them back on track. After all, London gets the designation as the most multicultural city in Europe yet there is a melting-pot philosophy creeping over, the songwriter says.

"There is a government commission out to encourage people to be more British, but they don't exactly explain what it means to be more English. There is a huge debate in the newspapers about whether Britishness is the opposite of multiculturalism because these things weren't defined."

Bragg argues that Englishness is about having a sense of fairness, and that stretches all the way back to the Magna Carta. He talks about fair play over the years, and maintains that it should remain a universal tenet in British politics.

"When the women struggled to get the vote in my country in the early years of the 20th century, it was about fairness. In 1948, we implemented universal free education, free health care, affordable housing, proper pensions -- this was about fairness. This is the agenda we need to be putting forth. It's a matter of knowing your history and knowing your traditions."

But is "play fair" just simplifying a complex idea into slogan form?

Well, yes. It's what Bragg has always done on his albums. He chose to write a book this time because he had a classic Billy Bragg problem. He had too much to say. Writing a book tapped the well, inspiring a number of new songs, though in a live setting, listeners get a good dose of both. Bragg treats the stage as a lectern with guitar-accompanied dissertations on the state of the world.

"You have to put (big arguments) into simple terms, Bragg says. "You have to start with a big idea and put it into practice."

So, what does the idea of fair play mean for his country?

"It means a universal bill of rights," Bragg says. "People are being deported from our country because they have Arab-sounding names and they need rights that are enforceable by law, otherwise they are useless."

Billy Bragg plays the Capital Music Hall, 128 York St., Saturday. Tickets & times, at End Hits, 407 Dalhousie St., or through Ticketmaster, 613-755-1111 or [www.ticketmaster.ca](http://www.ticketmaster.ca).

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