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Billy's battle for a better Britain

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[YOUR VIEW](#)[SEND TO A FRIEND](#)[GOT A STORY?](#)**STEVEN RUSSELL**

SOMEHOW it's hard to reconcile the Billy Bragg who in punk rock discovered a sense of belonging - the Billy Bragg who helped gatecrash the Queen's silver jubilee by sending the Sex Pistols to number-two spot with their sneering anti-national anthem, and the Billy Bragg who went on to fight the miners' cause against Margaret Thatcher - with the 2007 model.

**Billy Bragg**

This morning, for instance, he's been presenting certificates at the local agricultural college.

With Billy in his 50th year - just - and having become settled in Dorset over the past six or seven years, it would be easy to leap to conclusions and think he'd gone a bit soft and comfortable.

And that would be wrong.

Even when running under the flag of punk he was never an agitator bent on chaos and anarchy. Yes, he'd have happily overthrown the Conservative Government, but only because he wanted to build a better England; not

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because he wanted to create a wasteland.

It was, and still is, about establishing a country where everyone is valued and looked after. And, for all the negative connotations the label "protest singer" might bring, it's about accentuating the positives.

Which is why he was doing the official handshaking this morning.

The beaching off Sidmouth last month of the MSC Napoli had wide repercussions. At the bottom of the Bragg garden is Chesil Beach; which, like much of the Dorset and Devon coast, hasn't been spared. "Five miles of oil debris and mostly confectionery - stuff in packets the size of Mars Bars," he reports.

"The great thing is the students from the local agricultural college all came down and cleaned six miles of beach in four days and filled 3,000 plastic bags by hand. West Dorset District Council had some certificates printed up and I was just up there this morning, at the college, handing them out and saying thank you very much. They've made an incredible difference."

Which brings us neatly to his book. The Progressive Patriot won mixed reviews last autumn. Lots of critics liked it; other wondered what he was on about.

In the light of the London bombings, when men raised in this country and ostensibly rooted in English society were moved to kill 52 people, he found himself hemmed in by fascists on one side and religious fanatics on the other.

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notions of tolerance and diversity, he wondered what was going on. Maybe it was time for a new sense of belonging: to find a set of common beliefs, attitudes and values behind which everyone could unite, irrespective of colour, creed, politics, gender, age or class. And, while we were about it, let's take back our flag from far right groups who are giving patriotism a bad name. (At last May's local elections, Billy's native Barking and Dagenham area became the first in the country to have the British National Party as the second-biggest group on the council.)

"Patriotism is something I think comes out of values. The things I've always felt to be the best things about this country are the times when people have worked together to do something good: like creating the health service, or getting the vote for women. Fairness and tolerance.

"What happened on the beach down here was so different to what happened down at Branscombe." Scavengers fell upon the windfall like vultures. "It was the complete antithesis - and that's why I was proud to go to the college and say they'd done a great job and restored a lot of people's faith in human nature and selflessness."

What made us lose this sense of shared values that bound us together?

"I think the cult of the individual, and expressing yourself through consumerism. The idea that there's no such thing as society is so pernicious. Don't get me wrong: I'm all in favour of the individual; but unless the rights of the individual are guaranteed by things like the free provision of healthcare and education, and as a

society we work together to help every individual, if we don't do that then every individual will be at the mercy of the markets and only the rich and powerful will get to express their individuality.

"I think what we've lost is that connection between the individual and the collective, and what I'm trying to do with my book is draw people's attention back to that. It's still there.

"There are plenty of people, in all different walks of life - some working with their local church or mosque or temple, others working with the WI or meals on wheels, and others giving selflessly as individuals - there are people out there, the majority of people, willing to give their time and who never get the attention, never make headlines. If we work with each other, we can make a difference."

Did the rot set in with his old foe, Lady Thatcher, then?

"I wasn't old enough to recognise if it was around in the '60s and '70s. But I would say Margaret Thatcher worked on that: she exploited it; she decided that was the only way to do things." It was, he says, cynical.

Earlier prime ministers all supported the welfare state, he points out. "She was the first one to reject the idea of community and to replace it with 'there's no such thing as society'; so you do have to ask yourself whether or not there was a problem there.

"I can totally understand why people living in council houses would want to own their own home, but the trouble was they pulled up the ladder for those behind them, and that wasn't how or why the welfare state was

founded. It's the one thing we have as a nation that we can hand on to our children and grandchildren."

It's painfully ironic, one imagines, that after being politicised by Thatcherism, banging the drum for Labour as part of Red Wedge in 1987, and launching tactical voting campaigns to oust Tory MPs, Billy Bragg should see New Labour seize power . . . only to treat socialism as a dirty word.

Does he feel betrayed?

He chooses his words, but doesn't duck the question.

"I do feel a sense of disappointment. Politicians all seem to be wedded - I don't know why - to the belief that you can have low taxation and good social services. You can't. It's ridiculous.

"No-one's brave enough to stand up and say "If we want to look after our pensioners, we're going to have to pay for it. If we want all of our kids to go to university, it's got to be paid for, and either the pensioners have got to pay for it themselves, and the students, or we've all got to chip in.'

"And I would prefer that everybody chipped in according to their ability to pay. I would prefer progressive taxation to be used, as a way of helping everyone in society. I'm of the opinion that money is like manure: if you spread it around, it helps things to grow. If you pile it up, it stinks."

Another thing: he's come to realise over the last five or six years that while capitalism and conservatism are damaging, it's cynicism that we really needs to be cut out.

"When Labour first came into power,

when they didn't live up to our hopes, I certainly got very pissed off and I did a TV programme about the first year; and when I saw the programme (played) back I saw in my eyes real hatred.

"You saw me shouting at some New Labour apparatchik and I thought "I'm getting cynical, and really I've got to fight it if I'm really going to believe in a compassionate society.' If you're a cynic, you can't really get engaged."

Has he ever been tempted to stand for office?

"No, I've got a life."

But if you feel strongly and want to make a difference . . . Isn't that giving in to cynicism?

"But how am I going to do that? Do you think Tony Blair is likely to run the kind of tax I've just said? The party machine would eat me for breakfast - and, also, I look stupid in a tie."

I guess it depends who you think has most power: the politicians, with the machinery of Government at their beck and call, or individuals and groups beavering away on the ground floor.

"You can do more on a small scale that makes a genuine difference than you can on a large scale.

"I'll give you an example. I've just been working with a guy in a prison here in Dorset who's running - as part of rehabilitation in the prison - a guitar club. He came to me because he needed some guitars; and I was able to get him half a dozen and a pair of bongos for about 350 quid. Now, your average band could raise 350 quid and

kit out a prison. I'm going to start a campaign and say to bands "Would you like to do a gig?"

"You don't have to be Coldplay to raise 350 quid; your local band that plays down the pub could probably do that. And then they could go to their local prison and make a real difference, not just by supplying guitars but by making people in the prison think they're not totally forgotten by everybody outside. That's a good example of local activism making a genuine difference."

Having said that, there are issues that do need to be tackled at the top.

Billy claims the BNP is cynically exploiting people's fears about the lack of resources in his hometown of Barking, "where the real problem there is too many people chasing too few resources".

"We need to be fighting cynicism and making people realise their voices will be heard and that their concerns will be addressed." This should be addressed by the traditional democratic functions. "The last few years have failed to do that. I'm very sorry about that."

Still, he's forever positive. He's got ideas about reforming the House of Lords, for instance.

The second house should be elected on the same day as the Commons, he says. The Commons could continue with the traditional "first past the post" system, while seats in the Lords would be decided on the percentage of votes cast for each party.

"Instead of feeling your vote had gone in the bin if you didn't get the MP you

wanted, your vote and everybody else's in the eastern region would be totted up and would elect, say, 20 or 25 members according to the share of the vote cast. It would mean that 95% of the people who voted would get representation."

He'd also like a bill of rights - a summary of freedoms and expectations we consider important - and will be using some of his book publicity events to promote the idea.

Wouldn't a constitution be even better?

"A constitution is the whole caboodle: all singing, all dancing, resolving the monarchy, blah blah; everything. I'm just talking a bill of rights which articulates the principles upon which our society is based: basic fundamental rights. So when politicians mouth off about British values, we can all know what it means.

"At the moment we're asking people to integrate with British values without giving them a clear definition of what they mean. We're using words like fairness and tolerance. Well, where do you find those words in law? You don't.

"A bill of rights would also help protect us from the creeping sense that we live in a surveillance state: the fact that all our data is going to be on one computer; the fact we're going to have ID cards; the fact that road-pricing means we're going to have devices in our car and the Government will know where we've been.

"These issues are eroding our liberty in the name of security. Well, I don't

see why when we strengthen our security we can't strengthen our liberties at the same time."

Billy Bragg will be talking at Harlow's Playhouse Theatre on March 2, 2007, as part of Essex Book Festival. Box office 01279 431945; www.essexbookfestival.org.uk

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