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Monday, April 23, 2007

Billy Bragg answers your questions on St George's Day

Posted at: 19:10

To celebrate St George's Day Billy Bragg, [the songwriter and author](#), joined us at the Telegraph offices to answer your questions about the nature of Englishness.

Billy has published a book, *The Progressive Patriot*, on patriotism in the wake of the 2005 London bombings and last month issued a [call in the Telegraph](#) for a new "Bill of Rights that belongs to the British people, not the government of the day."



Billy Bragg in the Telegraph newsroom

Thank you to everyone who submitted a question or a comment for Billy Bragg. Unfortunately he wasn't able to answer every one - despite spending twice as long at our offices than originally planned. You can read his answers below.

- "The article asks 'why has English pride become associated with the racist right?' Why do you believe it has been?" (Posted by **Terry**, April 21, 6.34am)

Billy Bragg: "I think that this idea has its roots in the behaviour of

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English football fans abroad. Their belligerence towards anyone and everyone different – including black and Asian England fans – has been historically exploited by the far right. Although they are a minority, their exploits are widely broadcast, giving people a negative impression of any expression of national pride."

- "If England and the English are so bad, why do so many people from so many countries want to come here?" (Posted by **Bill**, April 21, 6.12am)

BB: "Who says England and the English are so bad? I love this country and its diverse people, but just like many of the contributors to this page, I have my criticisms. Surely we are confident enough in our sense of identity to be able to accept criticism without taking offence?"

- "Why are you living in a big house in Devon and not in the middle of the multi-cultural utopia that you so love?" (Posted by **Notorious Am**, April 20, 6.15pm)

BB: "It's Dorset actually. This is a question that I get asked all the time, an evolution from that old chestnut from the 20th century - 'If you like socialism so much, why don't you go and live in Russia'. I take it as a sign that the contributor has nothing to say on the topic in question – in this case Englishness and St George's Day. Stooping to personal attacks does nothing but undermine your credibility."

- "I have a sense that the Telegraph is one of the few papers that still has a sense of history, and Bragg's interest in radical history is well known. So, question for Mr Bragg, how far do you feel the problems now facing us result from our refusal to take history seriously?" (Posted by **Jon CG**, April 23)

BB: "Jon, thanks for your question – it gives me an opportunity to express my thanks to the Telegraph for inviting me to have this debate with its readers. Like many people, I was very disappointed when the last Conservative Government allowed history to become an optional subject. An understanding of history will help to explain so much of what happens in contemporary Britain, both good and bad. However, it is crucial that the teaching of history is not just a means of instilling pride in our youth. Those football hooligans who besmirch our name abroad do so through a warped sense of history which they use to justify inflicting violent behaviour on their hosts. A true sense of history is not only about understanding the struggles that ones country has been through, it is also about appreciating those of other countries too."

- "What is wrong with OLD England?" (Posted by **Ben Stanley**, April 20, 8.48am)

BB: "During the First World War, very few of the Tommies who fought for their country were allowed to vote, nor were any women. If you wanted medical assistance of any kind, you had to pay for it. If you were unemployed, you had to rely on charity. I don't yearn for that Old England. As anyone who has read my book will know, I respect the past but prefer to live in the present and concern myself with making a better future for all."

- "Billy, I finished reading your book last week and enjoyed it hugely. It was very readable, highly absorbing and well argued. However, I am not sure that I agreed with you about patriotism. I suppose – as Professor Jode used to say – that it depends on what you mean by

the word. You perceive patriotism as a positive virtue that the left should reclaim. I struggle to see it in those terms. If it's nothing more than a warm, fuzzy feeling born of familiarity, then what's the point? If it's anything more significant, then in what way is it not watered-down nationalism, and thus potentially dangerous? Someone once defined patriotism as the belief that your country is the best because you happen to have been born in it. For me that sums up the concept. Please tell me how your definition differs, and – more importantly – how your version of patriotism adds anything of value to people's lives." (Posted by **Peter**, April 23, 13.59)

BB: "I'm afraid I don't believe that nationalism is by definition potentially dangerous. Look at the difference between the BNP and the SNP. While the former is a self-declared whites only party – and therefore racist by definition – the latter are a progressive force to the left of New Labour. The SNP are proud of their country and confident enough in their identity to welcome anyone who lives there into their idea of the nation. By contrast, many of the comments made by those posting in favour of English nationalism betray a fear of diversity and modernity. My notion of patriotism embraces both those concepts. It's about where you are, rather than where your parents or grandparents were from. It is based on the notion of individual rights guaranteed by collective responsibility. It has the potential to make a significant contribution to social cohesion."

- "Isn't English patriotism defined in the words of the song that should be the English National Anthem: "A pride that dares, and heeds not praise, A stern and silent pride." By disregarding this definition aren't you just collaborating in trying to create a crisis that, for the majority of us away from the Westminster/Islington bubble, simply does not exist? (Posted by **Will Sheward**, 23 April, 14:36)

BB: "I'm afraid that 'Land of Hope and Glory', from where your quote comes, disqualifies itself from ever being the English national anthem by the simple fact that it does not mention the name of our country. There is only one real candidate for us to sing when we come together as a nation, a song which defines English patriotism as a constant struggle for better conditions for all – 'I shall not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand, til we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land'."

- "Hi Billy, Happy St Georges Day. Is it right as in your song that St George was not English?" (Posted by **Neal, Bren, Kieron and Skye**, 23 April, 15:05)

BB:"Hi Neal, Bren, Kieron and Skye – a happy St George's Day to you too. Yes, as I sing in 'England, Half English', St. George was born and lived in the Middle East. He's an economic migrant who came here seeking a better life for his family and was accepted as one of our own – which makes him eminently worth celebrating in my book."

- "How many flags of St George are you personally flying today?" (**Banachech**, 23 April, 14.37)

BB:"Bana, none I'm afraid. I will be expressing my love of England and St Georges by going to Trafalgar Square to take part in festivities organised by the Mayor of London. It may interest you to know that was outvoted during the recent football world cup on the flag issue. My missus was born in Trinidad and, as she and my son were supporting them, we flew the flag of Trinidad and Tobago who were drawn against England. Charmingly, most of the people in the village who saw the flag assumed that we must be Scottish."