



'Hastings' © Grace Lau (2005)



VERY BRITISH VALUES

Tolerance should be the first requirement in any test of British values, argues singer, author and activist Billy Bragg



Singer-songwriter Billy Bragg is an outspoken opponent of prejudice in all forms, and a supporter of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic modern Britain. The 49-year-old has been the target of attacks by the British National Party and other right-wing nationalist groups.

➤ After years of being given the freedom to become like everyone else or remain within their own culture – just like the Brits do on the Costa del Sol – immigrants are now being told to integrate. Tolerance of diversity is out. Conformity to “British values” is in. To paraphrase the Prime Minister last year: “Our tolerance is part of what makes Britain Britain. So conform to it; or don’t come here.” Which is kind of like saying, “We are a peace loving people and we’ll fight anyone who says different.”

Nobody has a good word to say for multiculturalism anymore. It’s blamed for everything from the 7/7 bombings to the “banning of Christmas”. Yet what exactly is it? Is it eating a curry with a few bottles of Cobra? Is it a respect for the foreign players who keep your team in the Premiership? Maybe it’s the

ability to have a good time with anyone, no matter where they are from. What it most certainly isn’t, is a society in which other cultures are given prominence over our own. If British culture really were under siege, then where are the bank holidays to celebrate Jewish New Year, Ramadan and Diwali?

It’s all very well asking immigrants to conform to British values, but first of all we need to be able to define them ourselves. If tolerance isn’t one of our cherished values then what exactly are they? Does integration mean coming out of Friday prayers and spending the evening getting fall-down-in-the-gutter drunk? The new citizens exam doesn’t really help, doing little more than teach newcomers a bit of history before getting them to pledge allegiance to The Queen, after which they are shown the door and left to work out which aspects of British behaviour they are supposed to be integrating with.

This is why the debate about defining Britishness has suddenly become important. What do we want those who come to live in our country to aspire to – our worst behaviour or our highest principles?

If you believe – as I do – that it should be the latter, then we need to find a way of manifesting those values that we cherish above all others: the sense of fairness and tolerance to which the British have always aspired; the concern for others that led us to fight against fascism, and a lasting commitment to provide free health care and education for everyone.

'The Progressive Patriot' (Bantam Press) by Billy Bragg is out now