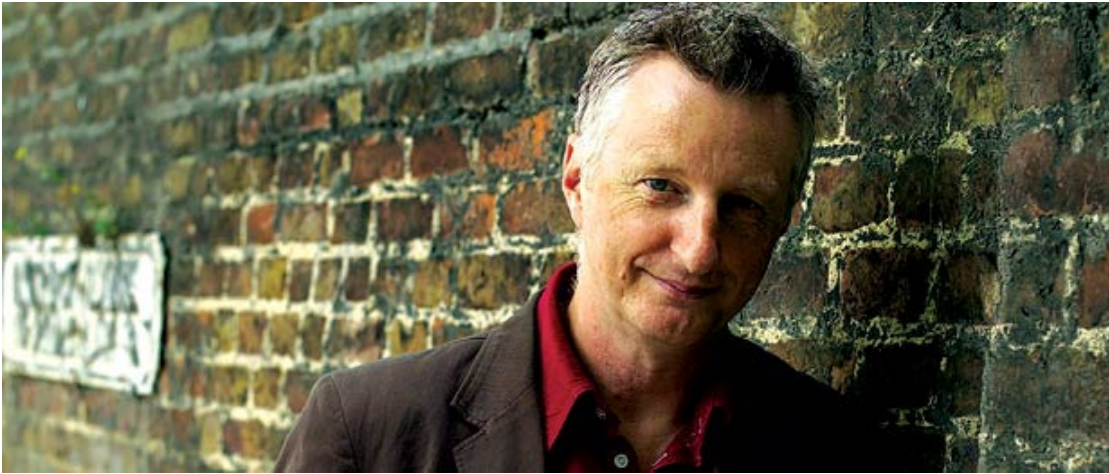




## Billy Brag

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Billy Bragg tells Doug Johnstone about his attempt to tackle the thorny issue of national identity in the acclaimed book, *The Progressive Patriot*

Billy Bragg was described by *The Times* as ‘a national treasure’. That particular phrase would surely bring a wry smile to his face, not least because the topic currently vexing the lifelong political campaigner and singer-songwriter is the fundamental and thorny one of nationalism and patriotism, what it means to ‘belong’ to a nation at all.

Although the so-called Bard of Barking has spent almost the last three decades performing and campaigning for socialist and humanitarian causes, this topic has touched him so strongly that it’s the first time he’s put pen to paper and created a whole book to expound his beliefs.

*The Progressive Patriot – A Search For Belonging* was published to widespread acclaim last year, and was a serious but also engaging attempt to tackle the question of what it means to be British or English (or Scottish or Welsh or whatever) in today’s world. The impetus for Bragg’s conjecture was twofold.

Firstly, a BNP candidate won a seat on his local council. As he was pondering the implications of that, the 7 July bombings in London focussed his mind on ideas of Britishness in the modern era. Far from being an exclusively polemical tome, *The Progressive Patriot* is actually an intelligent and subtle examination of the subject, which blends Bragg’s own personal background with more overtly political ideas.

‘Partly personal and partly political, that pretty much sums up 25 years of my music, so there’s no surprise there,’ he laughs. ‘You can take it all the way back to going to see *The Clash* at *Rock Against Racism* in 1978 – that was the genesis of all my political activity. Those issues of combating racism and supporting a diverse idea of society have always been in the background of everything I’ve done.’

In the book, Bragg spends a fair amount of time rubbishing the BNP’s idea of some kind of racially ‘pure’, white, Anglo-Saxon community in Britain under siege from foreign immigrants.

'They bandy that word "Anglo-Saxon" about, and they use a lot of Anglo-Saxon imagery, but what do they think that hyphen is there for?' he laughs grimly. 'Anglo-Saxon is a hybrid word for a multicultural group of people. That idea that there was once a homogenous, white English class is just rubbish. These islands, because of their position with regards to the European landmass, have always been a place of great migration, and long may that continue.'

'Today, their target is the large immigrant population, but there's always been a large non-English population in England, whether it's Scots or Irish or whatever. And you can't blame Poles for coming here, can you? The average wage in Britain is five times that in Poland. Now, if you were 20 years old, and there was somewhere you could go and make sandwiches or clean houses and earn £125,000 a year for three years and then go home again, you'd go, wouldn't you? It's no different from my brother laying bricks in Germany in the 1980s.'

Interestingly, especially with respect to his appearance at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Bragg spends part of the book examining the differences between nationalism in Scotland and England. While the British National Party expounds an ethos of exclusion and victimisation, the Scottish National Party, he argues, have long been advocates of the kind of progressive and inclusive nationalism so missing from the political scene south of the border.

'If you look at the SNP's statement of aims compared to the BNP statement of aims, they're chalk and cheese, they couldn't be more different,' he says. 'The SNP's civic nationalism, where you're talking about being proud of your community, that says a lot about Scotland. I don't wish to suggest that Scotland is a wonderful place for everybody just because you've got your own national anthem, but I still think having your own parliament and being able to distance yourself a little from the monarchy has allowed you to assert a more confident sense of identity.'

Ironically, as Bragg points out in his book, it took a display of Scottish national pride to bring about a blossoming of something similar down south, round about the football clash between the two countries at Euro 96. Before that time, the waving of the flag of St George was pretty much synonymous with right-wing racism. Bragg has been a long-time campaigner for reclaiming the St George's cross as a patriotic English symbol, something which eventually happened spontaneously through sport.

'It took the Scots coming to Wembley to remind us about the flag of St George, the whole resurgence of the use of the flag dates to that match,' he laughs. 'Nowadays, when people fly that flag, they're doing it for a multicultural football team, or cricket team, or rugby team, which is what I've always wanted. And when the BNP tell people not to support the football team because they're not English enough, support Denmark instead or something stupid like that, because they're all white, it just shows them up as being not patriotic at all. Those people who think they're superpatriots, they don't love this country at all, they hate this country and everything about it.'

According to Bragg, the key to a way forward for these isles is in the subtitle of the book – 'a search for belonging'.

'I think belonging is a much more important thing than Britishness, Englishness and multiculturalism, which are all hard to define,' he says. 'The 7 July bombers were integrated into British life, one of them worked in his family's chip shop, but something was missing there, and that was a sense of belonging.'

So where does Bragg see British patriotism heading in the future?

'I admit I'm sceptical about Britishness,' he says. 'If Britishness is just about looking back at a glorious past, the empire and all that shit, then I think it will die. But if it becomes a unifying idea that is successful for everybody – Scots, Welsh, Ulster, English, Bengali, Portuguese, Polish – if it remains open like that, then as a concept it might just survive.'

*Charlotte Square Gardens, 0845 373 5888, S at 18 Aug, 3pm, £7 (£5).*