

## TIME FOR BILL OF RIGHTS

Billy Bragg, Author Of The Progressive Patriot 12/03/2008

The Government are constantly talking about the idea of Britishness yet seem unable to come up with a clear definition of exactly what that means.

I'm proud of our diversity but I admit there is a hole at the centre of our multicultural society - what we need is something to bind us together as citizens.

While it's right there should be recognition when you become a full member of society at 18, asking teenagers to take a pledge of allegiance is little more than a sticking plaster for a larger problem. I support giving young people incentives to volunteer and get involved in communities - by paying tuition fees, for instance. That's a practical way to express your membership of society. It would earn you respect as an individual, and everyone needs that kind of recognition.

I'm not so sure about the proposed coming of age ceremony. I don't see how, at 16 or 18, making a pledge of allegiance to the Queen is going to make you a better citizen. It implies you're a subject rather than a citizen and it doesn't take into account how you feel about the monarchy. The Queen's role as head of the Church of England could be a problem for many loyal Britons.

The fact is, feeling proud to be British is not something to be imposed from above. You have to make people believe that it's in their best interest to belong. The July 7 bombers didn't feel they were part of our society. And telling them they were British and should feel proud of it wouldn't have changed their minds. Instead, we should teach children about the rights we've held dear for centuries, that we've fought world wars for - notions of tolerance and fairness.

A Bill of Rights expressing those ideas could then be the centre of the coming of age ceremony, marking the moment you become a citizen by pledging to uphold and defend those rights.

By defining British values in this way, we would be able to marginalise the extremists while bringing much needed clarity to the debates about Britishness.

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