



By: **Harvey Morris**

England's anti-migrant 'patriots' resort to foreign habit of putting up flags



The English don't really do flags.

Unless there is a coronation (mercifully rare) or a sporting win in the world arena (marginally less so), you will not catch many of them parading the Union Jack or England's red cross of Saint George.

Until this summer, that is. Across the country, or parts of it at least, self-declared patriots have been scrambling up lampposts to hoist the English flag or stooping to paint the red cross on suburban roundabouts.

The phenomenon is linked to an increasingly febrile debate about the government's continued use of more than 200 hotels to house some 30,000 asylum seekers **awaiting** a decision on their right to remain in Britain.

The flag-flying has spread beyond protests outside the hotels, **encouraged** by ad hoc groups such as Operation Raise the Colours that have been raising money online to pay for the campaign.

Although protests and counter-protests at the hotels have been relatively small and largely peaceful, they have fuelled already clichéd headlines that the country is 'a tinderbox waiting to explode'.

The current flag mania

The flag campaigns have in some cases been linked to the anti-immigration far right, which in its various incarnations since the 1960s has used the national symbols to promote its cause.

The current outbreak appears, however, to extend beyond that narrow cohort to include locals spooked by warnings of potentially hostile aliens in their midst and frustrated by the government's perceived inability to halt a perceived immigrant 'invasion'.

In the meantime, politicians from across the spectrum are hastening to reinforce their pro-flag credentials.

"We put up English flags all around Downing Street every time the English football team, women's and men's, are out trying to win games for us." - a spokesman for Keir Starmer

Challenged to express a government view on the flag campaign, a spokesman for Keir Starmer affirmed the importance of patriotism to the prime minister.

He "absolutely" supported people who put up English flags, the spokesman **said**, with the arguably irrelevant addendum that "We put up English flags all around Downing Street every time the English football team, women's and men's, are out trying to win games for us."

Some liberal voices on immigration have even suggested that they should join the current flag mania in order to reclaim the national symbols for progressive causes.

It is an argument that overlooks the enduring ambivalence of the English towards their national flag(s), which long predates their post-war use and abuse by far right groups.

Just a late summer folly?

A year into World War II, when the country had the threat of an actual invasion to worry about, the writer George Orwell noted that "in England all the boasting and flag-wagging, the 'Rule Britannia' stuff, is done by small minorities."

That perception was echoed this week by the historian Robert Tombs, who **acknowledged** that flags have not usually inspired in England the emotion they hold in some other countries.

Tombs, an 'anti-woke' academic who was prominent in supporting Britain's exit from the European Union, argued that when England was at the heart of an empire and of a successful multinational state, flag-waving

seemed unnecessary and even provocative. “It was what foreigners did.”

Today’s flying of flags to assert English and British national identity, he argued in an article in *The Telegraph*, represented a challenge to the legitimacy of the country’s elites.

Even if the flag fever turns out to be just a late summer folly, plenty of politicians are using the opportunity to make hay while the sun is still shining

The latter, he suggested, were the product of a post-1990s mixture of “anarchic individualism, globalisation, American anti-racism and fashionable anti-colonialism [that] has proved all too effective in subverting common nationhood.”

For Tombs and others, public disaffection linked to the flag campaign marks a turning point for the nation and what the historian termed “a sign of something momentous”.

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Very un-English pantomime over flags

Reform’s Nigel Farage has picked this week to lay out his right-wing party’s **plans** for the mass deportation of asylum seekers to tackle the ‘scourge’ of ‘illegal’ migration.

He is so keen to see the back of them that a future Reform government would offer their home countries £2 billion to have them back.



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In the perhaps vain hope of regaining support lost to Reform, Conservatives are latching on to the flag campaign. Robert Jenrick, seen as a would-be party leader, even **posted** a thumbs-up photo of himself half-way up a flagpole where he had hung a Union Jack.

Labour, meanwhile, are left to carry the can over the failure of successive governments to resolve the irregular immigration crisis. With some Labour councils moving to try to shut down asylum hotels, there is unease on the party’s progressive wing that the party is surrendering to the mob.

The government itself has announced a number of initiatives to bring down legal migration, reduce reliance on overseas workers and speed up the return of those who have no right to be in the UK.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of such a strategy, it is currently eclipsed by the present very un-English pantomime over flags.

For all the media headlines and social media posts, the number hoisted seems to barely amount to more than a few thousand overall.

Visitors are still more likely to see the flag on tote-bags and fridge magnets than on the average garden wall.

After all, the English don’t really do flags.