

The England football team represents our multi-cultural, progressive politics of nationhood. Its anthem doesn't

By Democratic Audit

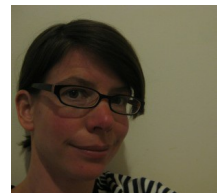
England football manager Roy Hodgson has insisted that his players must [sing the national anthem](#) at the forthcoming World Cup. We asked democracy experts for their views in response. In a [series of posts](#) on this topic, we hear how this debate raises much wider issues about belonging in a multi-cultural society, the history of English imperialism and the media's approach to reporting our national game.



England players have been less than enthusiastic singers of the national anthem in the past. Credit: [Umbro](#), CC BY-NC 2.0

Sanna Inthorn, Senior Lecturer at the University of East Anglia

So it looks like the England team will belt out [God Save the Queen](#). With [passion](#). Why can't they just stand there in quiet contemplation? For one thing, the commercialisation of the game has challenged the idea of traditional football culture. The number of English players in the Premier League has [fallen by more than half](#), plus the middle classes and women have started to take an interest. Fans are questioning whether [players are overpaid](#). Players who sing the national anthem and (preferably) shed a tear display their authenticity and the authenticity of the game. If they lose, it wasn't because their hearts weren't in it. The sight and sound of England players bellowing an anthem that speaks of monarchy, Christianity and rebellious Scots might also give a warm fuzzy feeling of belonging and certainty to those who feel threatened by the idea of Scottish independence and European integration. Perhaps we will see the sixth verse sung after all?



Peter Millward, Lecturer at John Moores University

God Save the Queen has accrued a number of different histories and cultural connotations and will mean different things to different members of the England team but over the past number of years not all members have sung the anthem. England captain, Steven Gerrard, has never held a consistent position of whether he joins or not, and ironically, current coach Gary Neville built a reputation for slightly bowing his head during the anthem. Forcing players who would have been otherwise unwilling to sing the God Save the Queen seems hugely unlikely to produce a spike in effort.



The reason Hodgson has adopted his current line may be to protect his players from the gaze of the jingoistic strains of the tabloid press. We have recently been reminded in the field of party political debate that the 'defense of national interests' can become entrenched in reactionary right-wing rhetoric. If England fail to progress through what – on paper – looks to be a difficult group and make a premature exit from the competition, it may be that some strains in the press (and then the public) would have turned blame on those who would not have belted out the anthem.

Daniel Burdsey, Principal Lecturer, University of Brighton

The pre-match national anthem remains one of the peculiarly traditional and nationalistic rituals of modern global sport, especially when many other aspects of competition are characterised by transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and widespread disavowal of the presence of political ideology.



The current discussion is characterised essentially by a fundamental paradox. While singing a song before an elite football match is ostensibly peripheral to more important performance-related concerns and thus arguably a trivial discussion point, it also raises some important sociological issues. Roy Hodgson's directive is grounded apparently in a desire to replicate the assertive patriotism of England's opponents, yet, placed in the wider socio-political context, it resonates with bigger questions about Englishness, citizenship and hierarchies of belonging. Broadly, one can question the relevance of a (British) anthem with a Christian (and imperialist, masculinist) ethos to a team that represents – visually – a progressive politics of nationhood. Specifically, the debate mirrors the cross-party political fixation with English language proficiency as a barometer of (inclination to) integration. Moreover, it represents a popular cultural manifestation of the importance attached to state-instigated 'core values' and the associated insistence on being 'proud' citizens introduced under the community cohesion agenda. Put simply, is a demand to sing the national anthem that far removed from the arbitrary and archaic stipulations of citizenship tests?

Hodgson's call is directed clearly at every one of England's twenty-three players, regardless of ethnicity, religion or birthplace. Yet this does not mean that other individuals and publics will interpret it – or any failure to endorse it – necessarily in the same manner. As the black British-American athlete, Tiffany Porter, and French Muslim footballer, Karim Benzema, would likely testify: even when it appears that all sportspeople are being asked to sing, some are being asked to sing louder than others.

Mark Groves, Senior Lecturer in Sports Studies at the University of Wolverhampton

I am not surprised that the media have picked up on this story. The British media have tended to use the World Cup in order to invoke a sense of national identity. Journalistic narratives seen during previous tournaments tend to focus on historic military figures or emphasise typical British characteristics such as fighting spirit, endeavour and the 'Bulldog spirit'. The story relating to our national anthem may well be another example of this.



Research in the area has suggested that there are a number of reasons for this type of media reporting at events such as the World Cup. Firstly, such narratives help to galvanise support for the team, but they also tend to celebrate particular qualities and characteristics in order to frame the British nation as superior. For example, we can think back to the 2006 World Cup when Wayne Rooney was sent off in the Quarter Final against Portugal. Narratives in the reporting of that incident focussed on the English traditions of fair play and blamed Rooney's red card on the tendency of foreign players to feign fouls and injury, and provoke English players into retaliation. Such reporting is not restricted to the opposition, with England players and managers who originate from different parts of the world also subject to this 'us versus them' style of reporting. Indeed, media narratives around the likes of Sven Goran Eriksson and Owen Hargreaves focussed on their cautious approach to the game and this was framed as being at odds with the British traditions of endeavour and fighting spirit.

Interestingly, more recent research has highlighted a potential change in this type of reporting, especially in the coverage of other sporting events. Indeed, media narratives around Chris Froome's success at the 2013 Tour de France were found to celebrate his African heritage rather than seeing it as a negative thing. This suggests that, in their reporting of cycling at least, the British sports media may be starting to embrace a form of national identity that reflects the multicultural or hybrid nature of 21st century Britain. It will be interesting to see if the media coverage of the forthcoming World Cup in Brazil follows suit, or whether it will be unable to move away from the 'us versus them' style of reporting often seen at previous tournaments.

Sean Kippin, Managing Editor of Democratic Audit

The American comedian [George Carlin](#) famously likened being proud of your nationality – a mere accident of birth – as being akin to taking pride in being 5'11 or having a genetic disposition towards developing colon cancer. That makes intuitive sense, but doesn't take account of the entirely involuntary sense of belonging and kinship that most people feel in their numerous, overlapping identities. I consider myself, in no particular order, a Geordie, an Englishman, a Brit, a Londoner, and a European. On top of this, my ears prick up when I hear the names of Whitley Bay, Heaton, Bethnal Green or Mile End (all places in which I have lived).



No one song or set of lyrics can ever do justice to the jumbled mix of our identities, and for that reason Roy Hodgson is wrong to insist that all of England's footballers sing any anthem at the World Cup, regardless of its content. The fact that God Save the Queen is a paean to empire (when a number of England players have ancestors who have been touched by its brutal legacy), our unelected head of state, and the murder of Scots should encourage the England manager to exercise greater caution still. A more inclusive (and frankly better) song should be found to replace the lamentable and offensive dirge that is God Save the Queen, but nobody should be forced to sing it, or be judged for refusing to do so.

This is the second of a series of posts on this topic. For further discussion with other expert views on Englishness and the national anthem, [click here](#).

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