

The flag of St George

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As politics.co.uk reports this morning, because it is St George's Day:

The prime minister has warned that England faces a “never-ending fight for our flag and what it represents” in an address to mark St George’s Day.

Speaking at a Downing Street reception, attended by former England footballer Gary Lineker and England Rugby captain Maro Itoje, Keir Starmer expressed his concerns about the far-right claiming ownership of St George’s Cross.

Let's ignore the fact that St George was quite emphatically not English, although that is an issue that cannot be avoided, which amuses me.

Instead, let's talk about what the English flag means and why so many are deeply embarrassed by it, and why the far-right so loves it.

First, that flag is used to symbolise exceptionalism. The trait is still evident, all the time.

Then it is about Empire, which is still prevalent in the almost entirely negative impact our remaining English overseas territories and Crown Dependencies have on the world, since many of them are tax havens

It is also all too readily apparent to the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who are still colonised with no opportunity for exit being made available precisely because of this continuing belief in the English right to rule them.

After that, there is the unfortunate endorsement of eugenicism implicit in support for the royal family, which this flag represents.

And then there is the fact that being English is a state claimed most often by those who wish to use it to exclude others who live in the UK, usually on the basis of ethnic origin, most of whom would think of themselves as British, but not English.

So what is it that Starmer is talking about?

If he is anticipating a post-colonial England where Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are allowed to determine their own futures, then he has reason to make that clear in his comments, but I very much doubt he is.

If he is talking about a country from which the legacy of empire is removed, that would be good. But it seems the far-right, the Mail, and the Telegraph want the exact opposite of that, and hang on to the flag precisely to promote the continuing, and deeply regrettable, legacies of empire. Since Starmer appears to subscribe to all of that history, as if we should be unambiguously proud of it, I cannot see him changing anything on this issue.

And if he is talking about a new symbol of a country rid of class hierarchy, which is used as the great barrier to entry for so many, which the royal family epitomises, that would also be good. But he is not. This is a man dedicated to social hierarchies and the class system. He loves his knighthood and his own act of parliament.

In other words, Starmer embraces all that is toxic about the English flag.

I will see that flag today, as I often do, flying from Ely Cathedral. I have never related to it. It represents a set of values I cannot abide. That is why it is toxic.

And the only way to solve that is to address the underlying issues. Over to you then, Sir Keir. Don't talk nonsense. Try doing something useful about this issue. Make England less toxic, in other words. Walk the talk. Learn what that means. Address the problem. Be the change you say you want.

But that's not going to happen, is it? And so, that flag will remain toxic. That's what politicians like Keir Starmer want.