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The St. George's flag is springing up around England. Is it a symbol of proud patriotism or weaponized nationalism?

By Olivia Kemp, CNN, August 30 2025

In the United States, the Stars and Stripes are everywhere: on porches, lawns and pickup trucks. The national flag is part of the scenery, almost invisible in its ubiquity. In England, flags are rarer. They usually surface only for royal jubilees, military commemorations or major sporting events.

But this summer, things are changing. The United Kingdom and English flags – the Union Flag and the Cross of St. George respectively – have sprung up across parts of the country in recent weeks, draped on street lamps, strung out across streets and even painted onto intersections.

For some, the spectacle is an act of patriotism – a community binding itself to its nation. For others, it is a provocation – a sense that the flag is being weaponized to make asylum seekers and “illegal immigrants” feel unwelcome. So, what’s behind the resurgence and what tensions is it stoking in England?

When did it start?

The surge in flags can be traced to a campaign called “Operation Raise the Colours,” which began this summer in the central English city of Birmingham and has since spread across other parts of the country. At its center is a Facebook group called the “Weoley Warriors,” which describes itself as a “group of proud English men” – 2,000 members strong – intent on showing Birmingham and the country that “all is not lost.” A GoFundMe launched by the group has raised more than £20,000 (\$27,000), with organizers saying all funds will be used only “for flags, poles and cable ties.”

Little is known publicly about its leaders. What is visible is its ambition: a network of supporters working lamppost by lamppost to cloak England in red and white.

Why is the flag controversial?

The relationship of the English to their flag is deeply ambivalent. Even the choice of which banner to raise is fraught – the red cross of St. George, a symbol of England, or the Union Flag of the wider United Kingdom, stitched together to represent four nations in one. Both have complicated legacies and at various times far-right groups have attempted to co-opt them.

The English flag, in particular, was prominent during the football hooliganism of the 1970s and 1980s, when soccer matches were marred by thuggish violence and racist abuse. And the Union Flag (commonly known as the Union Jack) was marched through Britain’s streets by the fascist National Front party – a group that openly championed white supremacy.

But since then, much has been done to reclaim both flags, and many Britons no longer bristle at the sight of flags in public places. “The far-right tried to use the British flag 40 years ago, but it stands for all sorts of things,” said Sunder Katwala, director of British Future, a think-tank. “It stands for Team GB (Britain’s Olympic team). It stands for the NHS. It stands for the armies that fought the World Wars, which were very multi-ethnic and multi-faith,” he told CNN. “If people think that the Union Jack or the England flag can’t represent ethnic minorities, they don’t know anything about... how minorities think about the history of the flag.”

A poll published Thursday by non-profit More in Common found three in five Britons want to see more flags flying in public places. But there is a distinction, Katwala said, between flying flags from one’s own property and daubing paint across the town. “Fly your own flags. Don’t conscript the lampposts to impose them on everybody,” he said.

Why now?

The surge comes at the end of a politically charged summer, when the issue of immigration has once more climbed in salience. This week, Reform UK leader Nigel Farage, the figurehead of the surging populist right in the UK, pledged to deport hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers and withdraw the country from international human rights treaties. His hardline rhetoric came after a spate of protests outside hotels that are used to house asylum seekers while their claims are processed. (...)

In recent weeks, protesters had gathered outside the hotel after an asylum seeker from Ethiopia was charged with sexually assaulting a schoolgirl in the local high street. He denies the allegations and is awaiting trial. In the town of Nuneaton in the Midlands, demonstrators marched beneath St. George's Cross flags, chanting "Stop the boats" and "We want our country back," after two men who are reportedly Afghan asylum seekers were charged with the alleged abduction and rape of a 12-year-old girl. They deny the charges.

For Michael Kenny, professor of politics at the University of Cambridge, the flags expose that "national identity in the English context has become a political battleground." (...)

Document 2.

"Right now Britain is going through truly unprecedented change. When you look at the opinion polls, you see things that we have never seen before. Never have we seen a newly-elected government lose support so quickly. Labour is now at just barely 20% in the polls. Never have we seen a prime minister with such low approval ratings, -54%. Nobody has ever been there in my lifetime, let alone been so low and gone on to win.

Never have we had a new party come out of nowhere and be not just ahead but *ten points ahead* in the polls. Reform is now at 30%. At first I thought this was an opinion poll phenomenon—but Reform has gone on to win council after council after council. They won twelve councils in the May local elections, and the polls suggest they will do just as well in the Welsh government elections. Reform might be governing Wales soon and might be coming second in Scotland. (...) This is how things look right now. But the iron rule of British politics is that nothing ever stays the same for even a year. The wheel is still very much in spin. Who knows? This is why I exited the prediction business some time ago. Suffice it to say that anything could be possible.

When Labour won a little over a year ago, the majority was so big. Now it is very difficult to see Keir Starmer coming back in these approval ratings, and even harder to see who might replace him.(...)

We are seeing things fall apart, and the phrase I hear most of all in Westminster is a line about how "the old is dying and the new is yet to be born." Where this could all go is anybody's guess, but right now we see a vacuum of political authority. And into that vacuum, of all people, we have Tommy Robinson. I do not expect anybody who does not follow British politics to know who Tommy Robinson is. I like to think that he does not show up in the non-British algorithm so much. Robinson has been in jail several times, he is unhesitatingly described as far right. Nigel Farage wants nothing to do with him, he will kick out of his party anybody who is close to Tommy Robinson. Yet Robinson has found a new patron in the form of Elon Musk.

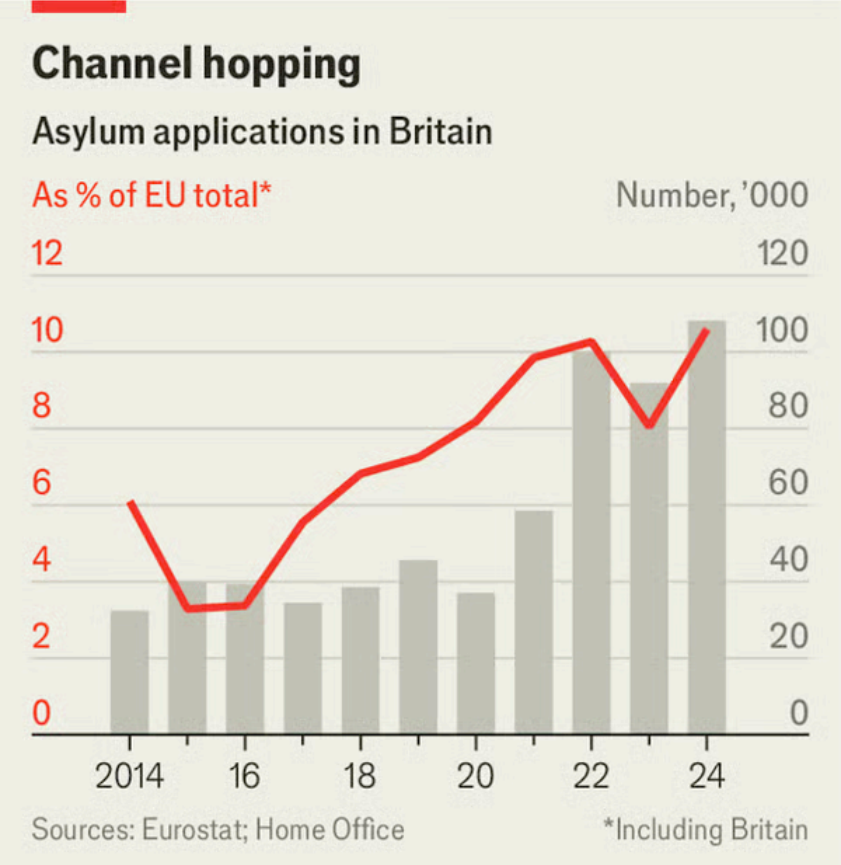
To me this is quite significant. You can go back in British history and find out when the *Daily Mail* was interested in the Fascist Party and you can look at Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts, but the most they ever got was to the Albert Hall. That was not very much. Tommy Robinson was able to lead a march just a few days ago of 130,000 people. That figure itself is not huge. It would not even make the top ten in the marches of the last ten years. The Palestine marches were almost half a million. The Brexit marches were about a third of a million. But never have we had somebody like Tommy Robinson lead something of that size.

That is where you have to stop and ask yourself what is happening. Are we seeing the far right taking off in a way they have never taken off in this country before? Right now I am not so sure it would fit that description, because when I saw it—not so much Robinson, but the people joining the march—people who spent time in that march, who spoke to others, did not see things that would really fit the description of the far right. It was called the "Unite the Kingdom" march—it was called a pro-patriotic march. There were a lot of people in a celebratory mood. There was a gospel choir singing *Jerusalem*. There were placards about immigration, about the small boats, but that is not exactly an extremist position.

Perhaps the most dangerous moment of all is that Tommy Robinson has captured quite a lot of mainstream political opinion. Whether he could lead his own party or not, I do not know. It was one of the things I never thought I would live to see."

Fraser Nelson, "The Good Fight Club" podcast, 20 Sept 2025

Document 3. The Economist 18 September 2025



Document 4. The Economist, 17 September 2025

