

# So, do you love your country?

How would you answer the question if put on the spot - as the Guardian editor was at a select committee hearing last week? We asked some notable public figures to reveal how they would pledge allegiance to the United Kingdom

When the editor of the Guardian went before a parliamentary select committee last week to defend his newspaper's publication of secret intelligence files leaked by the former CIA employee Edward Snowden, the questioning was, at times, blunt. "[Do you love this country?](#)" asked the committee chairman, Keith Vaz MP.

It seemed to cause Alan Rusbridger visible discomfort – but why? It's not a trick question. So we asked a selection of the nation's public figures how they would respond if asked to explain their patriotism, what their country means to them, and what makes them love it.

Here are their thoughtful – and surprising – replies.

**Fay Weldon**, novelist

Of course I love my country. I was brought up with Walter Scott: "Breathes there a man with a soul so dead, who never to himself hath said, this is my own, my native land". When I come home from "wandering in the foreign strand", I love the contrast between the green, damp middlewayness of England and the yellow burntiness or white iciness of foreign reaches: I love the noise of laughter and chatter at Heathrow after the sullen silence of distant airports. I stand for the national anthem because I value tradition more than I fear being thought a fool: and I manifest my love of country by chucking other people's litter in the bin and working for prison charities because the sooner prisons, like the State, wither away, the better. I love the country and its people, but I do not particularly love the State.

\* Fay Weldon's *The New Countess* is out now (Head of Zeus, £14.99, [fayweldon.co.uk](http://fayweldon.co.uk))

**Joan Bakewell**, broadcaster

I am patriotic to the roots of my hair. Of course I am: I was a child during the war, and we were fighting wicked people for our country's survival. I grew to love the landscapes first; walking the Lake District and the hills of Derbyshire, I learned what beauty was. Then I began to love its buildings – parish churches, theatres, cathedrals. I walked by the coasts, the cliffs, the golden beaches; I love the rivers, not just the great swathes of Thames and Avon and Mersey, but the multitude of smaller brooks and streams, all fed by our wayward but rewarding climate. From literature, I have taken a love of Shakespeare, Keats, Milton and the great Victorians; from music, Elgar and Britten; from art, Constable and Turner. Above all, from history, I take pride in the evolution of our freedoms and rights, from our continuing tolerance and sense of justice. Where else can match it?

**Richard Madeley**, broadcaster

One's relationship with one's country lasts longer than marriage, parenthood or even a lifelong friendship. But like any of these, it can be taken for granted. Do I love my country? It's not a question I have asked myself before. I don't think anyone has ever put it to me, either. No wonder Alan Rusbridger, The Guardian editor, looked taken aback during the select committee hearing, as if he'd been asked: 'Do you like breathing air?'

It's easy to be cynical on the point. British soldiers in the First World War were told they were fighting for God, King and Country. Their German prisoners explained they were fighting for God, Kaiser and Country. Did love of Britain somehow automatically trump the enemy's devotion to the Fatherland? I think I'd use a different 'L' word: loyalty. I have loyalty to my country, to its often muddled but sincere attempts to do the right thing, its inherent cheerfulness, unquenchable self-belief, beautiful countryside, and lousy weather. On reflection, that sounds suspiciously like love after all.

**Anthony Horowitz**, novelist

There are so many things that annoy me about Britain. The terrible weather and the way we'll stand in the rain – at a picnic or a wedding – gaily pretending we're having a great time. Our self importance. The belief that the world still takes any notice of what we say. Our horrendous diet (from the great British fry-up to fish and chips, we seem determined to give ourselves a heart attack at the earliest

opportunity). Our obsession with royalty, aristocracy, celebrity and wealth coupled with our ability to turn against them at any time. Our inability to do anything right (the French and Chinese have to build our power stations for us) and our almost hysterical self-congratulation when, miraculously, things work out okay (the Olympics). Our innate snobbery and barely concealed xenophobia. Our infantilism – a love of Dr Who, Harry Potter, Marmite soldiers...

And yet, even as I set all these down, I realise – of course – that they are also the reason why I love Britain. I couldn't live anywhere else.

\* Anthony Horowitz's Russian Roulette, the latest Alex Rider thriller, is out now (Walker Books, £14.99, [anthonyhorowitz.com](http://anthonyhorowitz.com))

**Esther Rantzen**, broadcaster

I have never taken England for granted. How could I? I was born in June 1940, the crucial summer of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain, so from my earliest years, I knew that I owe everything – my life, my family's life – to the fact that I live in this country. I am a British Jew. As I grew up and learned about the tragedy and horror of the Holocaust, I became more and more passionate about my own amazing country that nurtured and protected me.

We may admire Germany for her organisation, for her efficient industries, for her great composers, but my mother fostered a little boy whose father was murdered in a concentration camp. Italy may have inspired artists and sculptors of genius, but the Italian Fascists caused my father to lose his job. (A pioneering electrical engineer, he worked for Marconi's in London, until Mussolini came to power and the company sacked him for being Jewish. Then he joined the BBC).

My parents taught me to love British justice, fairness, tolerance, the beauty of the language and literature, the sweetness of the countryside, the charm of our villages, the elegance of our finest cities. I inherited my fierce patriotism from them. My mother, in her seventies, was determined to Buy British, her clothes, her car, everything. I had the finest old-fashioned English education, in a girls' school in London, and then Oxford. I have had an enviable career. And on the way Britain has taught me important lessons, like how to walk in the rain. And why gardening offers sanity. And to say sorry when someone else bumps into you. And to admire eternal mysteries, like how so many can find cricket exciting.

But best of all, I learned that one ordinary person can make a difference. Bless you, England, and thank you.

**Charles Saumarez-Smith**, head of the Royal Academy of Arts

I love my country because, even though the industry is in decline, it still retains a liberal and literate press, which represents a wide variety of views and can hold parliament and politicians to account (as was demonstrated by the Telegraph's investigation of parliamentary expenses). I love it for many other things as well: for its countryside, and the way that it has been so substantially preserved through legislation; for its art; for its museums and its attitude to its history; for its literature; and for the astonishing energy and diversity of its capital city. If someone asked me if I were a patriot, I would say: 'Of course.'

**Libby Purves**, broadcaster

I was an expat kid, a diplo-brat carted across continents and tipped into random schools in Thailand, France and Krugersdorp. Between postings, the sight of a policeman's helmet or red bus was exotic, as if the Just William or A Little Princess books had come to life. Sent home to boarding school as a teenager, I found it improbably exciting to get a bus into Tunbridge Wells. Getting to know the homeland, from the bleak, low eastern sands to the towering west, from Oxford's cloisters and Liverpool docks to Mousa Broch in Shetland, was a thrill, and it still is. In 1986, we sailed round mainland Britain and it felt like tying a bow round a marvellous present, the top prize in life's lottery. Yes, I love Britain. Physically, culturally, socially, nowhere's like it.

**Ben Fogle**, TV presenter

I have been fortunate in my 40 years to travel to the farthest corners of the globe. Across oceans, up mountains, through jungles and over poles. I have spent time in tropical paradises and in distant

kingdoms – but my love for one country has endured. Great Britain, the United Kingdom, England... I always come home to my true love.

To love a country is to yearn for it when you are away. It is to forgive its foibles and its weather, and to love it unreservedly. I am proud of my country, our language our history and heritage. Our rolling green hills and our fields of happy cattle. The magnificent coastline and our glorious cities. It is a love affair that cannot be broken by politics nor economics. It will endure miserable rainy summers and sporting failure, because I am British and that is what we do.

We take everything in our stride, with a stiff upper lip and warm cup of tea. As a nation we don't wear our pride like our American cousins. There is no flag waving or nationalistic celebrations, but inwardly, we are brimming with pride. For centuries, our little nation has punched way above its weight. Go on, say it out loud: I love Great Britain!

**Lord Robert Winston**, fertility expert

I am a Jew. My family arrived in England in the 1680s and flourished. Some became distinguished in the humanities, some went into the theatre, music or business, one fought on HMS Victory at Trafalgar, some entered Parliament. My grandfather was a rabbi. My mother was a fiercely politically independent mayor of a London borough. Above all, I experienced nothing suggesting that it was difficult being a Jew – in fact, my own immediate family is possibly more religious than many of my British ancestors.

I love Britain, not least because it spawns people like my admirable friend, Richard Dawkins. Richard is a fine example of what it means to be British. When he is being tolerant, principled and gentle – though he will doubtless deny it – he shows the influence of those fine Anglican Christian qualities which have encouraged many of the virtues that typify the best of our society.

**Alan Titchmarsh**, gardener

My own love for my country is a complex mixture, bound up in the landscape and the people who, over the years, encouraged me to appreciate it and to care for it. Queen and Country? Yes – in that HM symbolises my devotion to hill and dale, river and woodland, and to those people – real people – I meet on a daily basis. These are the folk who work quietly at what they do, who ensure that others are cared for, and that life is about more than self-fulfillment and personal acquisition.

The love I feel for my country is something quite separate from politics and the noise of intellectual argument. It is basic, innate and rooted in nature – a handing-on of responsibility to the land and to those who live on it and off it. I love my country – and countryside – and would gladly die to preserve its integrity and its beauty. It sustains us both physically and emotionally and is all too often overlooked in the heat of petty argument.

**Justin Webb**, broadcaster

For a time, midway through a decade-long BBC correspondent's posting, I fell in love with America. Meaning: I became convinced that the US was superior to Britain – more vigorous, more alive, better to be with. Perhaps it was a midlife crisis. There was even a sports car involved, a racing green Chrysler Sebring. It was passion but it was not patriotism.

Culturally, I can only be English. So do I love England? Yes, and this is what it boils down to: I feel grateful to the generations who made England as pleasant and decent and free as it is. I feel I know them. It's a multi-layered familiarity. I think our culture, tweedy and pipe smoking and empirical and musty, is worth defending.

But here's a secret confession that I offer up before Keith Vaz beats it out of me: if I could live in Miami, I would.