

## **THE USES AND ABUSES OF NATIONAL STEREOTYPES**

*Isobel Lindsay*

English is undoubtedly a shorthand for some complex and contradictory terms. (Perhaps the reader should pause and ask what the term conjures up to her or him.) Why has nationality been employed to make sense of social change?

(David McCrone 1994)

Holland was ... a nation of flower-arranging pornographers. Danes were depressives and Swedes racked with guilt; earnest souls with birch twigs. Greeks were self-centred, Italians fancied their chances. Turks were sex-crazed and the French were unspeakable bastards. There wasn't a decent national stereotype left in the whole of fucking Europe.

(Janice Galloway 1995, p.55)

The importance of national stereotypes lies not in whether they reflect a reality, past or present, but whether they are part of our consciousness and, as such, may influence behaviour. This is obviously a significant issue in the study of territorial politics. The dynamics of nationalist and regionalist movements may originate in economic and social change but without some perception of an historical, cultural or geographical identity which is distinctive, political action could not take the same form. The study of the construction and reinforcement of such identity has been a rather neglected area in political sociology. It has been more characterised by theoretical speculation than by research. This small study of Anglo-Scottish stereotypes is a contribution to this and I would hope it might stimulate other projects so

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that we could build up a more substantial body of material to inform our analysis.

#### **IDENTITY AND STEREOTYPES**

Perceptions of identity can never be value-neutral. They are strongly value-laden. In aspects of identity which have political implications, understanding the values is part of understanding the politics. But the converse may also be true; understanding the politics may be significant in understanding the construction of identity. There is an inter-active process. Identities are not principally 'invented' but they can be politicised and, perhaps, shaped by the pursuit of ideological agendas. We don't know enough about the extent and process of change but it may be that there is an appropriate analogy with Marx's concept of a class in itself becoming a class for itself through the heightening of consciousness.

It is not just national or regional identity in isolation which is important but identity in relation to others. In discussing the Caribbean, Stuart Hall has emphasised the importance of 'counter identities'. It was this which was crucial in 'providing sources on which the important movements of decolonisation, of independence, of nationalist consciousness in the region have been founded' (Hall 1995). The identity we project onto the group from which we seek to distinguish or assert ourselves is an important aspect of defining 'us'. The relevance of this to Scotland is self-evident.

The stereotype is an essential component in the construction of identity. It is a universal way of trying to find pattern and predictability in complex experience. It is closely related to the sociological concept of role. While stereotyping per se is universal not pathological behaviour, it can be used in an infinite variety of ways, fair and foul. Walter Lippmann in his classic 1922 essay 'Public Opinion' presented a positive interpretation of the stereotype:

A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great, blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short-cut. It is all of these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect, it is the projection upon the world of our sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are

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attached to them.  
(Lippmann 1922, p.96)

The reverse side of this positive interpretation is, of course, the stereotype as a source of exclusive, unjust and aggressive behaviour. Maryon McDonald, examining aspects of regional identities in Europe, discusses this other side:

Stereotypes are deemed to be deeply implicated in the xenophobia and racism from which so many evils, past and present, have stemmed.  
(McDonald 1993)

Both of these interpretations are valid. The development, the use or the abuse of the stereotype has to be assessed in its specific context.

There has been a long history of academic exploration of the stereotype, most of it in social psychology rather than in other disciplines (O'Donnell 1977, chapter 2). One of the interesting conclusions is that stereotyping is certainly not the preserve of the less educated or less sophisticated. From the earliest studies in the 1930s to the latest, highly-educated groups appear to be able to conjure up national and other stereotypes with ease. In one sense this should be surprising since there is so much about stereotypes which seems irrational. We all know that there is an enormous variety of individuals and groups in any society and this should make generalisations difficult. Yet most people seem to generalise with ease. In a recent study Nico Wilterdink (1994) examined the national stereotypes produced by a highly-educated, cosmopolitan group studying at the European University Institute in Florence, all of whom had worked in European Union institutions. There was little difficulty in getting them to express views about the national 'personality' of the French, English, Germans, Italians and Dutch. The predominant image they had of 'Englishness' was chauvinist, isolationist, arrogant, reserved and cold. The French incidentally, were considered even more chauvinist but they were seen also as highly cultured. So the sophisticated work with a structure of stereotypes as do the less experienced and less educated.

Sociological interest in identity and its construction has increased in recent years, primarily in the context of post-modernist theories. The key points may be summarised thus. The increasingly rapid rate of social change has produced greater fluidity, variety and individualisation of identity. The decline of those inter-related structures of work, social class, neighbourhood and family associated with modernism has left people with a greater, more

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fluid variety of identity choices - gender, age, race, ethnicity and nationality, class, sexuality and consumption patterns.

The subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed not of a single but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved identities ... This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualised as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a moveable feast, formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural system which surrounds us. (Hall 1992, p.275)

The conclusion is that since rapid social change has made identity more fluid, so it produces greater potential for the self-selection or the manipulation of identity to achieve particular ends. In the political context, movements and power bases may be built around gender or ethnicity or race as readily as around social class. Therefore identity groups and their values and objectives become a more important object of study. Political action based, for example, on territorial identity needs to be understood through the study of symbolism and imagery as well as explicit political programmes.

This is a highly ahistorical approach which greatly underestimates the influence of non-social-class factors in political behaviour in the past and underestimates the influence of social class in the present. In the Scottish context, religion had a central political role and also urban/rural differences. Recent evidence suggests that perceptions of social class divisions are stronger than they were previously (Deer 1996). However, it is legitimate to signpost areas of study which have been neglected in the past. The processes of identity formation and reinforcement together with their role in political behaviour is an important and underdeveloped subject.

Having a sense of different national identity has been a central factor in Scottish politics for the last thirty years and a factor of some significance since the last century. Part of the case for constitutional reform is that there is a strong sense of Scottishness, and, indeed, there is much survey evidence to support this (Brown et al 1996, chapter 9). This is certainly not the whole case. There are arguments based on Scotland's different institutional structures, on democracy and on subsidiarity. But without the identity factor, the pressure for a Scottish Parliament would have lost much of its edge. A sense of 'Scottishness', however, is not enough; there has also to be a

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perception of 'Englishness' to differentiate it. These identities do not need to be perceived as mutually hostile but they need to be perceived as different.

### **NATIONALISM AND STEREOTYPES**

Part of the nationalist strategy has been to use national stereotypes to project certain messages. It has been, if not a construction, at least a cultivation of aspects of identity. There have been three strong themes developed. One is that the English are more prosperous and the Scots more deprived. There are frequent references in nationalist political discourse to the wealthy South-East and the money spent there in contrast to the fuel-poverty of the elderly in the cold Scottish climate or the proportion of unemployed in Glasgow housing estates or similar selective images. The second theme is that the English have more right-wing values and the Scots more egalitarian values. A standard refrain over the past eighteen years was 'the English Tory government', always identifying the Conservatives with England. A third element in the stereotype suggests that the English are ethnocentric and are ill-informed or unconcerned about other nations. The lack of knowledge of or interest in Scotland, the frequent use of English instead of British and the insensitivity towards foreigners are used as examples to contrast an England preoccupied with itself unlike Scots who mix well with people from other countries. These images have not just been cultivated by political nationalists but have been common in broadsheet and tabloid journalism.

The English have stirred up animosity for themselves everywhere. They have offended and oppressed most of the countries of the world and especially those of Europe.

(Dunnet 1996)

These stereotypes have a two-fold objective. They differentiate and they also strengthen a specific political agenda. Scots are more deprived and, therefore, would be better managing their own resources. Scots are different in their politics and should have their own government to express this. Scots are more internationalist, get on better with people in other countries and, therefore, would benefit from an international role. But the stereotypes cultivated by politicians and other activists may not be the same as those which are held by most of the public. If we are to understand the interplay between the political stereotype and the imagery of the wider public, we need to have some information as to what the latter is. It is not disputed that Scots have a strong sense of national identity. Indeed strong unionists like Michael

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Forsyth have tried to indulge that identity with kilts and stones of destiny. But information on the content of identity has tended to be anecdotal or sourced from historical or literary references. The study of Anglo-Scottish stereotypes reported here attempts to provide some stimulation for further work in this area.

### **ANGLO-SCOTTISH STEREOTYPES**

#### ***Research design and methods***

The pioneering study of stereotypes was carried out by Daniel Katz and Kenneth Braly in 1932 (Katz and Braly 1947). They used a technique which has often been repeated (Buchanan 1951, pp.515-32). They asked 100 Princeton students to select adjectives from a prepared list which they considered described most accurately 10 national and ethnic groups. They found that respondents did have stereotypes of varying strengths and that you could identify patterns.

Although this has become a standard technique, it has the disadvantage that, even with a good pilot study, it does not allow people to use their own language and does to some extent direct them. The advantage is that it ensures that the processing of responses is simple and consistent. Since in the present study there was only a two-group comparison with no attempt to weight the relative importance attached to the characteristics, it was decided that the questionnaire should be left unstructured.

The project had its origins in an exercise used for teaching purposes. Students were presented with a blank sheet of paper and without any advance warning were asked instantly to write down characteristics of Scottish people and English people. The results were used as background to the discussion of national identity issues. It was unusual for students to be unable or unwilling to do this. It was decided to use this method on a larger scale to assess the extent to which there were well-established patterns in Anglo-Scottish stereotypes. The aim was to get an instant response in a relaxed setting where respondents would not feel inhibited or feel they had to take the exercise too seriously. We did not want the genuine stereotype to be modified by imposing 'reason' and 'correctness' on gut reaction. The groups were selected on grounds of accessibility by those working on the study. People were presented with a paper on which there was one question: 'What characteristics do you associate with English people and Scottish people?'

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There were two columns for each category to be filled in as respondents chose. There was no other guidance except that they were asked orally to write down whatever came to mind quickly. No information was taken on personal details. At this stage the interest was in whether people would be able to produce stereotypes readily and whether a clear pattern would emerge. The answer to both these questions was clearly positive.

220 questionnaires were completed. Only six expressed an objection to the idea of national characteristics or a view that the people of every country were the same. This does not, of course, take account of those who avoided participating. In the social settings in which questionnaires were distributed, it was not easy to judge between those who did not want to be bothered and those who were uncomfortable with the idea. The impression was that it was the former reason which was much more common. The sites at which the study was conducted are shown in table 1.

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**Table 1**

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<b>Sites at which the study was conducted</b>		
<i>Type of respondent</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Number</i>
Mature students	Ayrshire Further Education College	32
Borders rugby club		27
Pensioners' lunch club	Lanarkshire	13
1st and 2nd year students	Glasgow	46
Householders in street	Ayrshire housing estate	21
Journalists		7
West End pub	Glasgow	18
City Centre pub	Glasgow	17
Ayrshire town pub		18
Students Union	Glasgow	16
15 year old schoolgirls	Lanarkshire	5

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**Table 2**

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**Proportion of respondents listing particular characteristics of Scots**

	Percentage of Respondents Listing
Friendly/Warm/Kind-hearted	63
Patriotic/Nationalistic/Proud	29
Humourous/Good Fun	17
Direct/Down to Earth	12
Low Self-Esteem	11
Aggressive/Paranoid	10
Honest/Unpretentious	7
Political/Socialist/Anti-Tory	6
Rough/Brash	6

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**Table 3**

**Proportion of respondents listing particular characteristics of English**

	Percentage of Respondents Listing
Arrogant/Snobbish/Stuck-Up	66
Lager Louts/Hooligans	30
Zenophobic/Racist/Insular	17
Reserved/Aloof/Unfriendly	15
Tory/Right-Wing	12
Individualistic/Egotistical	10
Northern England Different	9
Confident	9
Materialistic/Money-orientated	8
Opinionated/Prejudiced	6
Affluent	6

**Results**

There were some obviously jocular answers but overall a strong pattern emerged. Tables 2 and 3 give a summary of the percentage of respondents who listed each characteristic.

There was, of course, a wider variety of answers than those listed in tables 2 and 3 but the rest had only a few references. The following vignettes give examples of individual responses.

**1st Year Student**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Down-to-earth	Arrogant
Friendly	Unfriendly
Nationalistic	Inhibited
Proud	Prejudiced
	Conceited

**Borders Rugby Player**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Proud	Reserved
Deep sense of history	Self-centred
Chip on shoulder	Arrogant
	Insular

**Pensioner**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Reserved but friendly	Arrogant
Helpful	Mean
Generous and caring	Outgoing
Sometimes dour	Like to be heard
The English treat us as second-class citizens	But there are good and bad in all walks of life
The Border is a dividing line in more ways than one	

**Student**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Friendly	Affluent
Heavy drinkers	Mean
Inventors	Domineering
Reticent	Superior
Poor speakers	Impervious to feelings of others
Sense of humour	Good speakers

**Mature F.E. Student**

**Ayrshire Householder**

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<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Friendly	Inconsiderate	Friendly	Confident
Unhealthy	Arrogant	Reserved	Ignorant
Overweight	Thin	Feel inferior	Arrogant
Down to earth	Fit	Chip on shoulder	Fast living
Funny	No sense of humour	Defensive	Money-centred
Unconfident	Football hooligans	Harp on about past battles	Egotistical
Under-achievers	Full of themselves but have no reason to be	Slower pace of life	Insensitive

**Kilmarnock Pub Customer**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Generous	Loud-mouthed
Drunken	Posh
Friendly	Hooligans
Unhealthy	Racists
Proud	Big-headed
	Proud

**Schoolgirl**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Friendly	Big-headed
Liked by other countries	No sense of humour
Not ignorant	Can't take losing
	Slag-off other countries

**City Centre Pub Customer**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Sociable	Articulate
Humourous	Resilient
Self-effacing	Ambitious
Helpful	Courageous
Industrious	Too verbal
Inventive	Money-orientated
Reliable	Selfish
Open	Loud
Football addicts	Football addicts

**Journalist**

<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>
Pride	Arrogance
Passion	Insularity
Insecurity	Smugness
Maudling tendency	Superiority
Self-pitying	Will Carlingish

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Hard drinkers	Lager louts	
Aggressive	Devious	
<b>West-End Pub Customer</b>		<b>Student</b>
<i>Scots</i>	<i>English</i>	
Friendly	Arrogant	Having lived in England, Wales and Scotland, I find all racial stereotyping offensive and the appeal to the narrow-mindedness of such stereotypes is distasteful.
Community-based	Individualistic	

### *Stereotypes of Scots*

A very strong pattern of stereotyping emerged from the responses. The Scots seemed fairly comfortable and positive about their identity as friendly, warm, down to earth, patriotic, humorous people. The negative in their self-image was a perceived element of paranoia and low self-esteem, but these were not dominant. Having a positive national self-image is to be expected. Stereotypes of one's own country have tended to be flattering rather than critical as a post-war UNESCO study illustrated (Buchanan 1951).

### *Stereotypes of the English*

When we turn to the image of England and Englishness, the characteristics are particularly negative.

We can identify three principal elements in the English stereotype:

- Arrogant, Snobbish, Reserved, Confident, Affluent
- Lager louts, Hooligans, Racist, Xenophobic
- Tory, Individualistic, Materialistic

There was also a spontaneous reference by some that the North of England was different, by implication more like Scotland.

There are obvious contradictions within the overall image. The first and strongest part of the stereotype suggests a social class related image of Englishness. From the Welsh viewpoint of his youth, Raymond Williams described his 'learned perspective of England':

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An amalgam of Neville Chamberlain, Sir Samuel Hoare and Lord Halifax, of Jubilee and Coronation, of London and the Home Counties.  
... Anything that was not it had attractions.  
(Williams 1989, p.65)

The Scottish perception (and perhaps that of the rest of the world) still has strong elements of this middle/upper class image. This imagery has been particularly fertile in the Scottish context because of the image of a geopolitical relationship between a large and dominant group and a small and dependent one. At the level of personal experience the fact that there has been little inward migration by working-class English people into Scotland but some significant migration by managerial and professional English people will also have reinforced images.

But the current stereotype is interesting in that added to this rather upper/middle class image is another strong element which is quite different - that of a rather loutish, anti-foreigner working-class. So the image is not just negative because 'Englishness' is perceived as representing a dominant, affluent, elitist group. The working-class have come into the picture and they appear to have jumped out of the pages of **The Sun** as the xenophobic, aggressive children of Thatcher. This should sit rather uncomfortably with the traditional upper-class image but most people in the study seemed able to combine these two facets. The explicit ideological element in the stereotype - the right-wing, individualistic, materialistic English - has a smaller number of references but reinforces the two other negative components.

#### *Change over time*

Are there any grounds for thinking that these Anglo-Scottish stereotypes have changed over time? We do not have comparable material to assess this. One study in the sixties (Budge and Urwin 1966) into political behaviour asked a sample in two Glasgow constituencies what qualities they admired in the Scots and the English. These were different sample respondents and the question differed but there is enough overlap to give a comparison some relevance. Prominent then in the Scottish self-image and missing today is work. References to the Scots as 'hard-working', 'proud of their industries' were significant then but not now. In contrast the 'patriotic/nationalistic' dimension is prominent now but was not then. It would appear that much of the pride which was focused on industrial prowess has moved to pride in country. Also interesting was that there were more references then to the English as people who could enjoy themselves more easily than the Scots

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whereas in the present study there is a stronger element of the Scots as fun-loving. This may be a sign of the demise of the Calvinist ethos or just a reflection of the difference in respondents.

The 'lager-lout' element in the current English stereotype is clearly of recent origin since it was in the 1980s that it came into prominence. It is striking how strongly it has come into the image. From the Scottish perspective there may be some element of self-satisfaction in this since in the past such an image was more often associated with Scottishness. The **Daily Mirror's** 'Jock the Ripper' headline from 1977 after a Wembley game was typical of the treatment in earlier periods (Moorhouse 1989). This picture of the aggressive, drunken Scot as projected in the South was often resented. The past decade has seen a reversal of the roles, with Scottish pride in the good behaviour of the 'Tartan Army' in contrast to the deteriorating behaviour of English fans.

Both of these changes - the apparent disappearance of the work element in the Scottish stereotype and the emergence of the loutish element in that of the English - illustrates how change can take place in comparatively short periods. Stuart Hall referred to this fluidity in national identity:

Identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves, it is stories which change with historical circumstances. And identity shifts with the way in which we think and hear them and experience them.  
(Hall 1995)

This issue of the sources of continuity and change in stereotypes is one into which further research input would be valuable.

### ***Politics***

We identified above aspects of Anglo/Scottish stereotypes which had been used in nationalist political discourse. These were that the English were more prosperous, that they were politically more Conservative and that they were more ethnocentric. These elements certainly seem to be significant in the popular stereotype and while this may be self-reinforcing because of their prominence in political propaganda, it is more likely that politicians cultivate attitudes which are already there rather than create them afresh. The explicit political references are a small proportion of the total. 12% described the English as 'Right-Wing/Tory' and 6% referred to the Scots as 'Socialist Anti-

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Tory'. But there are implicit political messages in the main components of the stereotypes which could be described as a political narrative. The description of the Scots as patriotic was the second most frequently mentioned characteristic and these references were generally in positive language. This is an indicator of the importance of the national dimension in Scottish politics.

The principal characteristics in the Scottish self-image, the friendly, down to earth, kindly, good-humoured nation represent non-elitist virtues. There is little sign of ambition or deference. Pride is not personal but pride in the country. The view of England suggests an entirely different set of values, linked to hierarchy and dominance. The patriotism of the Scots contrasts to the insularity and xenophobia of the English. The Scottish stereotype involves values of solidarity and sociability. The English are seen to be concerned more with status and power.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

What are the explanations for the very negative image of Englishness? The smaller partner in any relationship has to assert itself more strongly to maintain identity and that means emphasising differences. In so doing it also involves selecting and rejecting values. The Scots have developed a strong stereotype of Scottishness and Englishness. Some of this may relate to experience but much of it is a construct, an ideal type which serves to protect identity and to assert certain values which are felt to be threatened.

Despite the negative stereotype of the English, there is not much evidence of widespread personalised hostility. This does not seem to be a substantial issue. Englishness appears generally to be an abstraction which is used for certain purposes and which can be distinguished from actual people. Raymond Williams described this separation of stereotype and reality.

England ... was the dominant English class, these alien figures who ruled us and disposed of us; but there all the time, when we went to visit or live among them, were all those other incongruous, incompatible English.  
(Williams 1989)

But are there circumstances in which the stereotype could be personalised and develop its own destructive dynamic? Could the abstraction take on an

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individual face? Stereotyping as such is not the same as prejudice. It is a form of categorisation into types which may be positive, negative or mixed. A UNESCO study in 1951 found that those people with lower educational levels who were more likely to have greater hostility to some minorities were less likely to have developed national stereotypes than the more highly educated. It is not a simple relationship. Having a well-developed range of stereotypes does not in itself imply an authoritarian, hostile personality. How those stereotypes are used is the important factor.

There have been some tensions in certain rural communities in Scotland where there have been high levels of in-migration. It is significant that two small extremist organisations, Scottish Watch and Settler Watch, have arisen in the rural south and the Highlands respectively. They have not attracted much overt support but there is a problem associated with housing shortages and cultural tensions in some small communities. There has been occasional resentment about influential jobs going to people from England (McGinty 1996) on the grounds of undermining cultural identity but this has been marginal. Overall the English in Scotland are not seen as a 'problem', quite unlike the tensions which developed around the Irish in Scotland earlier this century. They are generally fairly integrated, but these comments have to be qualified by the fact that this has not been tested by research.

Scotland is a stable society which even in the worst periods of urban violence in England in the 1980s showed no signs of emulating that disruption. There is a ready scapegoat available in the form of a dominant political entity at Westminster which can be the focus of resentment. There is a strong liberal civil society which is important in opinion formation and in channelling protest. As we can see from the present study, the Scots like to think of themselves as very friendly and tolerant. This may be a flattering image but it is not entirely without foundation. But such negative stereotypes as we have found do carry risks. Although, having survived the frustrations of four Conservative governments which could be blamed on English votes, it is difficult to envisage circumstances which would personalise hostility.

However, before the Scots (and perhaps others beyond our shores) can begin to have a more favourable image of England, the English may need to tell better stories about themselves. There are many good English stories but we seldom hear them. What we do hear too often is about kings and queens, admirals and empire, the triumphalism of the rich, the contempt for the outsider. Now that England has decisively rejected the Conservatives in the general election, we have a new Government with the potential to project

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different values and symbols. There were few indications of this during the election campaign, with the notorious bulldog and the Union flag to the fore. But stereotypes, as we have seen, can be modified. If there are now some new stories to be told about England, perhaps the Scots will be prepared to listen.

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