

## **By 2050 England will have recreated itself: visionary, multi-ethnic, free. Is this farewell to the bulldog breed?**

**By David Starkey**

QUESTIONS, once upon a time, were things that happened to people in faraway countries of which we knew little. There was the Eastern question, the Balkan question, the Palestinian question, the Indian question and, always and most intractably, the Irish question. What there was not, of course, was the English question. Instead, it was our job as a Power to solve other people's questions (though the Irish, famously and ungratefully, changed their question whenever the English answered it).

But suddenly, at the end of the 20th century, the English have realised, to their surprise, that there is an English question too - within Britain, within Europe, as we ask ourselves: "What sort of nation are we? Are we a nation at all?"

The politicians have already come up with their own attempts at national rebranding. John Major offered cricket and warm beer, Tony Blair cool Britannia and William Hague the British way. None remotely works.

If we continue to get the answers wrong, our future is grim. We will sink beneath the waves we once ruled and become either a pseudo-independent Ruritanian statelet or a sulkily resentful province of the Euro Empire.

On the other hand, if we get them right, the sky's the limit. England could become a new, bigger, more successful Hong Kong, and English could become the global language.

Napoleon sneered that England was a nation of shopkeepers. Two hundred years later, as his vision of a united Europe is achieved, we should go a stage further down our own path. England should become an international marketplace in which people, ideas, wealth and trade all move freely - without taxes, tariffs, censorship or immigration controls. The result would be a nation unlike any other that the world has seen. In some essential way, it would still be England.

Fantastic? Not really. For it's all there in our history. Everybody knows that England was the first nation to industrialise. We were also the first to experience the pangs of de-industrialisation, and the first to develop a flourishing post-industrial economy. The history of English nationalism follows a broadly similar path.

For we were there first as well. As early, for instance, as the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547) England had acquired the whole apparatus of cultural nationalism - something that took the Germans another 250 years to assemble.

There was a national historic myth, a state-sponsored canon of English literature and a determined attempt to push the claims of English itself to be a great European language, despite the fact that it was spoken by only 3m natives and by scarcely anybody else.

One thing even Henry VIII lacked, however, was a national dress. But there were attempts to remedy this in the 18th century by making Van Dyck dress the English national costume.

Happily, in view of its satins and lace, the attempt failed. Indeed, what we can call the classic period of English nationalism proved short-lived. The driving force of royal autocracy was defeated in the civil wars of the 17th century - wars that also led to the absorption of England into the new political unit of Great Britain.

At first, there was an attempt at forging a single national identity for Britain and the Britons. But the attempt foundered quickly. Instead, Britain half-reverted into its constituent elements, which developed two distinct identities.

The Celtic-fringe nations of Scotland, Wales and Ireland took on board the whole panoply of cultural nationalism. In Scotland, it was loyalist and done under royal patronage. George IV, his kilt riding up over his flesh-coloured tights, presided over Sir Walter Scott's tartan pageant in 1821, while Victoria built Balmoral and cosied up to John Brown. In Ireland, the Gaelic revival fed directly into anti-British nationalism.

The English took a different route. Instead of cultural icons, they revered their political institutions, such as parliament and common law. And they thought them the best in the world. In so far as they had national symbols, they were the crown and the Church of England, with its Shinto-like worship of the royal family.

We come now to our immediate millennial crisis. For the English, it is a crisis of de-nationalisation. The decline of Britain abroad and the loss of confidence in our political institutions at home has robbed us of our sense of identity. Nor is there much else we can fall back on - thanks, ironically, to our earlier success. Everybody speaks English and everybody wears the business suit, derived from the Victorian frock coat. Without a dress and language we can call our own, we stand inarticulate and naked among nations - as you will find out if you ask an Englishman to define his Englishness.

For the Celtic fringe, on the other hand, the end of the millennium has been a time of national revival. As their sense of nationhood is cultural, Britain's political decline has left them untouched. Indeed, it has been an opportunity to extort yet more goodies from the weakened Westminster parliament.

But the dividing of the ways is coming. The two great political questions of the moment are devolution at home and relations with the European Union abroad. For, in both cases, the interests and attitudes of England and of the Celtic fringe diverge radically. For the Scots and the Welsh, devolution is an unadulteratedly good thing. For the English, devolution is a disaster, offering only a choice of evils between dismemberment into the so-called English regions or colonial subordination to the governors of Scotland's new Labour.

Over Europe, the faultlines are similar. The European Union will require a merging of political identities. For most European countries this is more or less acceptable, as their principal sense of nationhood is a question of culture and language. If you speak French you are French; if German, you are German; and if Welsh, increasingly, you are Welsh. Language is less important in Scotland. But the folklorique aspects of Scottish nationalism are also what the Eurocrats, like Hollywood, flatter and indulge.

For the Celts, therefore, Europe is not a threat but an opportunity. The English

are different. Our sense of Englishness is primarily political, not cultural. Take that away and you take away everything. This is why Europe is a uniquely explosive issue in England. And it will blow up, I imagine, with the fireworks over the dome on New Year's Eve 1999. Thereafter, change will come almost as quickly as the first hangover. First, Britain, swayed by England, votes against the euro; then Scotland and perhaps Wales break with England and plunge fully into the European Union. The breach with Scotland will be the moment of truth. England will be alone. And it must re-invent itself - but how?

There are two choices. The first is nationalism; the second is what I have called post-nationalism. The nationalist route would involve a crash course of indoctrination in national symbols: flags of St George at every corner, Land of Hope and Glory on everyone's lips. It is a step into the past; it would also probably fail. For the new nationalisms of Europe and the Celtic fringe are underpinned by racism and substantial middle-class support. Both are missing in England, where the flag of St George is sported only by taxis and the white-van-driving classes. Nevertheless, in its present mood, I fear that the Tory party will plunge, Gadarene-like, for this obvious but losing option.

On the other hand, it is just possible that new Labour, if Philip Gould's claims about its commitment to permanent revolution are right, will opt for post-nationalism. For post-nationalism represents a real third way. It takes a commitment to political and economic liberalism from England's past. It combines them with the tolerance and the ability to accommodate racial minorities from our present. And from the best of past and present it would forge a future to be proud of: free, free-trading and prosperous. London would become the world city; Ireland, with the divisive symbols of Britishness finally laid to rest, a valued ally, and England would cease to see its future in terms of throwing in its lot with something bigger; ie America and Europe.

For one thing surely is clear. The new millennium will indeed be a new age. It will not be the costly, lumbering mammoths of existing states and corporations that will flourish, but smaller, fleeter-footed creatures. The new post-national England could be one of the first of this new species. Let us hope so.

**David Starkey is an historian, broadcaster and fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge.**

*The live online debate with David Starkey was held on Sunday, February 21, 1999.*

*Here is a transcript of that debate, based upon the article above.*

## **Online Debate Transcript**

HOST: This is the second chat in the series and it is our pleasure to welcome Dr David Starkey. David Starkey is a historian, broadcaster and fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

Tom1: Why is it that "the British way", "cool Britannia" or John Major's "cricket and beer" will not work?

DAVID STARKEY: No. Once upon a time England had things like a dress and a language that were quite specific. But then they become part of world culture (English national dress is the business suit!). In other words, we lost our uniqueness because of our success and the fact that other people copied us so much.

HOST: Email Question: Are we a nation at all?

DAVID STARKEY: We are a post-nation. Just as we were first into industrialization and first out of it, so we were first into blood-and-soil nationalism in the 15th and 16th centuries and first out of it in the late 20th.

HOST: Email Question: How would England benefit from devolution?

DAVID STARKEY: I see traditional nationalism as backward (Kurds and Kosovo). Scotland and Wales seem to be opting for this sort of closed society. So the sooner they go the better. Scotland and Wales are also wedded to big-spending, old-style state socialism. We need to get rid of that too.

LizA: Your post-nationalist England would surely still need shared "myths and symbols" (to quote Anthony D. Smith), which of their nature are rooted in the past, so how do you reconcile this vision with Smith's theory of "ethnie" as a major element of national identity?

DAVID STARKEY: I think Smith is dealing with old-style nationalism. English (and American) sense of identity is different. It relates more to institutions and economic well-being and success. It's not about romantic failure like the Celts'!

Beetle: How much influence would a de-unified England have on a global scale?

DAVID STARKEY: Influence in the future will depend on cultural and economic success - not simple size. I think we could do very well.

Suilin: What sort of role do you see the royal family taking in the "post-national England"?

DAVID STARKEY: Probably not much - though in a funny way Prince Charles is beginning to look like a prophet (but prophets, remember, are without honour in their own country!)

amimjf: Hello,.. do you think that society moves in anything other than an ever broadening circle,... won't new things start to represent being English/British, as the old ones disappear..?,

DAVID STARKEY: No. I think something fundamental has happened. The old symbols are dead and there's no sign of any new ones. And I challenge anybody to name them.

Ken: I'm not sure how to reconcile D.Starkey's view of an England smaller "fleeter footed" outside the E.C. when nearby countries (Scotland, Wales) are in the E.C. What does this do to our relationships there?

DAVID STARKEY: By the way, unfortunately for both New Labour and Old Tory, English and British are not the same! If Scotland and Wales remain in Euroland when England has left it that will be their problem not ours as jobs and money flow to the freer markets of England.

LizA: Surely even a post-nationalist England will need an identity, which I cannot identify from your article...

DAVID STARKEY: What is American identity? There's no single answer. Post nationalism is like post modernism. It's fluid and changing and flexible. Fixed identities belong to a dead world.

Paul: Do you think that it would be possible in the near future to directly wire computers into the brain, replacing the need for conventional monitors keyboards etc?

DAVID STARKEY: Quite simply, nations are a human invention. that means they are a creation of time. So they have a beginning, a middle and an end. I know nothing about computers. But those who do seem to think that direct interfaces with the human brain /senses are possible.

stoof: Do you think that the UK can ever become a match for USA in terms of weaponry?

DAVID STARKEY: English defence/aerospace industry is already the biggest after the US. We seem to have both the military experience and the engineering/technological imagination to come up with matching products.

Alex: I agree that England has problem. Our malaise is our continual search for something new. The youth of the country is restless, searching abroad on their years off in the east for originality. At least we have our eyes open. Is this not the symbol of a new Englishness?

DAVID STARKEY: I don't think that England has a problem. The people with problems are the Scots and the Kurds who are going straight back to the nineteenth century if not to the middle ages with their simple, aggressive ideas of fixed, separate identities. We are the future!

Ken: If we are looking for a redefining of "England" is it worth remembering that things are defined not only by how we see ourselves but by what we view ourselves in "opposition" to?

Tom1: Is it not time though that we left behind this ethnocentric attitude that we are the leaders of the world (empire builders if you will) and accept the principle that we are just another country in the wings of the world stage?

DAVID STARKEY: I'm not in the least ethnocentric (I don't believe in an English race). But we are not marginal. Because of English and the importance of economics and modern science, which are Anglo-American inventions, we remain a highly significant player. And that's fact, not nostalgia.

Animjf: The old symbols will take time to fade away ,.. (the stiff upper lip won't go overnight,.. with Viagra and all..!),,.. I think England is still distinctive for its amateurism,.. and reluctance to change,.. but when it does change it will do so very quickly,.. I think we will become one of the most opposed of societies with dramatic technological progress and monolithic institutions co

DAVID STARKEY: I absolutely agree about the dramatic suddenness of change in England (look at the 1960s). But our rigid institutions are collapsing. Perhaps it's good-riddance, though they have served us very well (contrast British 20th century political history with almost every other country!)

Marco: How long have you been in England?

DAVID STARKEY: I was born here in 1945 and my father's family at least has been in the north-west of England since the fourteenth century.

Phil: Imagine, if you will, the Fourth Way: that England becomes the 51st State of America. Imagine the prosperity, the influence and the pivotal position England would enjoy. Could this be the Future?

DAVID STARKEY: I don't want to be the 51st state any more than I want to be a province of Euroland. Big warships belong to the Sixties. In the world of the Internet being small and fast is more important than sheer size.

Kismet: You say, that when the 'divisive symbols of Britishness' are eradicated from Ireland the Irish will become a 'valued ally'. Presumably you are referring to the inevitable breakdown of the Union? What role will the Irish have?

DAVID STARKEY: I do think that the Union is finished. I also think that Ireland is an intensely free-market capitalism that will increasingly find Euroland restrictive and England (free market too I hope) an attractive partner. Something similar could happen with Spain.

Tom1: How do you think that the historians of the future will judge the 90s? As a static period of superficial change, or revolutionary post-modern era?

DAVID STARKEY: I think that the post-80s are revolutionary. We have replaced a world of shortage (on which all our existing systems of morality and economics are based) with one of excess. You can already feel the difference in the air!

Beetle: What current developments give you the most optimism about England's future?

DAVID STARKEY: The speed of change, oddly enough. Somethings worry me though, like the tendency to privilege every minority. We don't want Commissions for this and that fostering division and special rights. Instead, we need simple, general and discrimination laws that are enforced in the ordinary courts of law. That's the proper English, law-based way.

LizA: If nationalism is dead, why is there such a furore over the euro/political union with Europe?

DAVID STARKEY: Europe does things differently. It's attitudes to law, the public interest, the role of bureaucracies and parliaments are different. And it risks challenging the enormous gains we have made since Thatcher, at such cost and sacrifice.

HOST: Email Question: With such a multi-ethnic society, how would it be possible to create an English identity without being racist?

DAVID STARKEY: Recreating a traditional English nationalism would be racist (look at the fate of the English in Scotland). I'm calling for a post-nationalism in which a particular kind of multi-culturalism becomes central to our identity.

Ken: The major problem with the old definition of English is that it left out all the black and asian citizens. Your definition would help to lay down the foundation for a society with a clearer view of itself and where it's going.

DAVID STARKEY: I agree. And the difficulty for the Scots and Welsh with their old-style nationalism is going to be to incorporate such racial differences: a black in a kilt? Do you see it?

HOST: Email asked: How will it be possible to generate interest and enthusiasm in a new identity?

DAVID STARKEY: A post-national identity would be the spring-board for very rapid economic growth. And that's sexy.

Alex: There are a lot of speculations about revolutionary change into the next millennium, I suppose in part sparked off by the level of technology we have reached, but don't you think perhaps it may all be hype? No doubt people at the end of the last millennia foretold all sorts of great happenings - perhaps we are all just victims of new-millennia stress?

DAVID STARKEY: People in 1899 indeed thought that they were on the edge of a new world: replacing production with distribution was how the future archbishop of Canterbury put it. And he and they were right. I think we are on the threshold of even greater change. We know this to be the case anyway because the 20th century really ended in 1989. The Millennium just makes it official.

LizA: If I recall your discussions on the Moral Maze the other day, you weren't at all optimistic about the creation of a multicultural identity in Britain...

HHawk: I have a Libertarian outlook, and firmly and eagerly buy into that a free market England, out of the EU, could take on the world, on every level, but I'm interested in the structural changes that would be needed to get from A to B.

DAVID STARKEY: I don't think that we need to do much that's new. Instead we must avoid reimposing old restrictions, whether from Europe or internally.

HOST: David thank you for joining us this afternoon

DAVID STARKEY: I very much enjoyed the afternoon.

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