

Many of the world's foreign affairs initiatives are powered and propelled by stereotypes. "Freedom", "evil axis" and the like. We tend to think such things are a product of folk wisdom handed down over generations. After all, didn't the Sicilians have a saying back in the 17th century that "the French are wiser than they seem and the Spanish seem wiser than they are."? It was recorded nearly 400 years ago by two visitors from the British Isles - Francis Bacon in his essays *Of Seeming Wise* and William Lithgow in his travel book, *Rare Adventures and Painful Peregrinations* - and it is as true today as it was then.

Yet quite a number of the world's stereotypes owe their origins to a governmental act of deliberate disinformation about a people. It is a practise that has been perpetrated by most nations at some time, but suffice it to quote two examples.

The first is the stereotype of the Dutch as mean, a perception that is widely shared by perfectly intelligent people. It essentially owes its existence and vitality to a propaganda campaign sponsored by His English Majesty's Government in the 17th century, with the aid of pamphleteers and diarists like Samuel Pepys.

Fearful of the challenge posed by the newly emergent Dutch republic, the court cultures of England and France could only accept the reality of Dutch wealth by linking it to a denigrating stereotype. So they commissioned the authorship of such derogatory phrases as 'going Dutch' and 'Dutch auction' to emphasise meanness, 'Dutch comfort' (thank God it's no worse!), 'Dutch courage', 'talking double-Dutch', 'talking like a Dutch uncle' and the like. Meanness, moralising and other abusive connotations were knowingly grafted onto the public image of the Dutch. Some people will say it's all true, but I interpret the perceived meanness of our northern neighbours as a proper appreciation of the value of things. As a long established foreigner in the Netherlands puts it: "I have come to the conclusion that the Dutch are not stingy after all. They just hate to waste anything."

The second example of deliberate disinformation is the stereotype of the Swedes. In response to an anti-USA movement in Sweden during the '60s and '70s, the CIA is reputed to have set in motion a smear campaign attributing Sweden with the world's highest suicide rate, also the highest alcoholism rate. John Alexander, an Australian interculturalist working in Sweden today, says that "the CIA programme proved effective. Ask any American and they will tell you about Sweden's high suicide rate. Even many Swedes believe it, as well as people outside Sweden. It makes you wonder what other cultural myths are out there..." Indeed.