

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

## Advance Australia Where? Nation Brands and Soft Power Down-Under <sup>[1]</sup>

It's that time of year again. 12 October 2010 saw the publication of this year's results for the Anholt Roper GfK Nation Brands Index. As has been the case in recent years, there are few surprises in this year's result. Obama's US retains the top spot ahead of the familiar family of European big hitters and Japan. Canada has slipped one place to seventh and the Swiss and the Australians have retained the eighth and nine positions respectively, despite both countries having well publicized image difficulties flowing from the referendum on minarets in the first case and violence against Indian students in the second case. These results bear out Simon Anholt's long standing message that national images are hard won and slow to change. Yet drill down into the data and you certainly find worrying indications for Australia at least. Speaking in Australia at the time of publication, Anholt cautioned an audience of university administrators in Sydney that Indian perceptions of social equality in Australia had declined from 7th place in 2008 to 34th place in 2010. This rating places Australia in the Indian mind in the dubious company of Colombia and Iran. Anholt warned his audience that the situation remained 'tinder dry' and further anti-Indian incidents could cause an explosion of bad feeling. Anholt is correct. The expanding ranks of Indian cable news channels have discovered that stories about Australian racism deliver big audiences. Indeed, the notion of Australian villainy is now so strong that the latest Bollywood film *Crook* tells the story of a young Indian's adventures in an Australia beset by racism and sleaze. A time bomb is ticking.

It is to Australia's credit that the India crisis has sparked a wave of introspection. Australia suddenly has an opportunity to rethink its public diplomacy. The country began this process with a senate inquiry in 2007 but had not done much to move forward.

Many Australians had noted the limits of the tourist brand of magnificent scenery and friendly sun-bronzed locals, which did little to help promote Australia as a research partner, education destination or investment area. Rather than merely giving Paul Hogan an intellectually supercharged script in which he offered the prospective visitor an extra 'decapedal crustacean' rather than a 'shrimp' on the 'barbie', the trade promotion body Austrade undertook a major redesign of the nation brand. In May 2010 they launched 'Australia Unlimited' a brand intended to open the meaning of Australia to include more than the tourist priorities.

The accompanying logo is a pair of open parenthesis to be filled by the observer's own imagination. The brackets are styled to resemble both boomerangs and the outlines of the east and west coasts of that country. Austrade's publicity materials for the brand include an impressive list of Australian achievements including winning 11 Nobel prizes, 41 academy awards, leading the world in mining technology and being home to the person who invented the cochlear implant, the wireless modem and Google Earth. But a brand can only do so much.

The crisis presents major challenges to Australian higher education but it has also served to point up some deficiencies. Since the drive for international students began in the mid 1980s it has been commonplace to speak of education as an export industry. It is now Australia's third largest export. The problem is that 'industry' is not just a metaphor. It is an organizing principle and those who work in the field worry that the social and intellectual rationales for educational exchange have been neglected. Lax regulation allowed fly-by-night operators to open in some cities, exploiting young Indians with bogus courses that were really just a backdoor to the first rung on the immigration ladder. Right now Australian international education is suffering from the double blow of the Indian story and a sky-high currency. Other Australian industries have successfully mobilized government support – perhaps by upgrading diplomatic representation for the education sector – but higher education seems to be too divided or stunned to ask for help. Pointing out to the government that their international education sector is not only an industry but a form of diplomacy, and one which has historically made long-term friends for the country, would add urgency to the case. Another part of the solution is already beginning at home. A coalition of researchers led University of Melbourne and funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council will shortly publish Finding Common Ground, a study and set of resources designed to enhance interaction between domestic and international students which promises valuable ideas for all international educators whether in Australia or elsewhere.

I was invited to Australia to be part of the conversation about public diplomacy within the university community and speak at the same conference as Anholt. It was my first trip 'down under' and I relished the opportunity to learn more about the country and the issues facing its international image. I was immediately struck by the gap between my own encounters and the impressive but rather dry list of achievements on the Austrade brand press release. Of course the people were as friendly and the country as beautiful as advertised but I found more. On my first morning in the country I went in search of the Sydney Opera house and selected a scenic route through the botanical gardens. Strange plants and bird calls were everywhere. As the gum trees parted and I caught my first glimpse of the famed white arcs of the roofline I heard something unexpected, the distant strains of bagpipes playing 'Amazing Grace'. I walked towards the music, climbing a low rise and found myself in the midst of a gathering of elderly Australians in a range of emergency service uniforms. They had mustered to remember comrades who had lost their lives fighting fires and rescuing people at sea. As the pipe band music swelled I began to read a row of small posters on sticks describing individual acts of heroism and loss. The signs read like poetry, with amazing feats ascribed to people with familiar British and Irish family names in places with similarly familiar British names but reassembled into a new and fantastic geography in which Penrith (a place in the far north of England) and Windsor (far south) are adjacent both to one another and to places with magical rhythmic Aboriginal names like Katoomba. As I read on I realized that the assembled veterans and the dead were all volunteers. I was stunned that these tasks had been taken on by volunteers. Remembering the role credited to the 140,000 volunteer guides in the success of the Sydney Olympic Games of 2000, I set to work that evening on-line gathering some statistics on the scale of volunteerism in Australia and elsewhere. What I found was an extraordinary level of Australian volunteerism, involving over one third of the population, whereas the US, UK, Canada and other G8 countries muster only a quarter of the population to voluntary work. The much vaunted US figure is swelled by religious work which, for all its value, is hard to compare to courage in the face of an on-rushing bush fire or a hungry shark. Australian volunteerism has its international manifestation too. Australians are at the frontline of NGOs, aid missions and various other good works around the world. This struck me as a much better story to tell than that of the Australian inventing Google Earth because it is a better predicator of the sort of person one would get if one invested in Australia or employed

an Australian.

The second story about Australia was manifest no less dramatically. The conference at which Anholt and I spoke opened with a ritual 'welcome to country' from representatives of the Cadigal people on whose land Sydney stands. After an impressive display of music and dance and great clouds of smoky incense, the president of the sponsoring organization – the International Education Association of Australia – opened the conference but included thanks to the original inhabitants of the land prominently in his remarks. It was a moving moment and Australian colleagues noted that for the past dozen years or so it has been a standard practice for officials and academics to make that kind of acknowledgement in speeches. It occurred to me that it would be a fine thing if Australian diplomats, politicians and visiting speakers overseas maintained the practice and routinely thanked the original inhabitants of each and every place where they were speaking, thereby underlining their country's special commitment to indigenous rights as an absolute principal and not a lip service when at home. It doubtless would raise eyebrows if the Australian Consul General in New York routinely thanked the Lenape people who gave the world the name Manhattan, or the latest Australian Oscar winner in Los Angeles acknowledged the Tongva people on whose land a certain Hollywood sign now stands. Maybe eyebrows need to be raised. Words would have to be chosen carefully in contested spaces like Israel/Palestine, but it would be consistent with the best ethics of Australia and more representative than the incidents of racial violence.

The bottom line for Australia is that the country's prime need is not to say more overseas or just circulate a new logo, but rather to ensure that people at home do more to conform to the first class brand that Australia still enjoys, even in India. For Australia's brand to be secure for the future a whole range of Australians need to see themselves as partners in Australian public diplomacy. Australia's universities are waking up to the task but Australia plainly needs to bring civil society into step with its internationalist brand. The India crisis suggests that state governments, cities, the Victoria police and many ordinary Australians need to get with the game. Australia is home to world class international media – ABC and SBS – but international communication is not only made at the top, images of Australia are built from all messages that cross borders included letters, phone calls, tweets and emails from tourists, asylum seekers, migrants and, yes, international students, which is where the crisis began. In a world of ever-increasing population movement, Australia's experience is likely to be repeated elsewhere. The world would do well to watch what happens next.

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