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The Reputational Reckoning for 2020: Part Two, Worrying News for the USA and Good News for New Zealand ^[1]

This is part two in a series of three conversations between Nicholas Cull and Simon Anholt on the latest results from the 2020 Nation Brand Index. Part one can be found here.

In 2005 British analyst Simon Anholt published the first iteration of his Nation Brands Index. Every year since the index has tracked the standing of fifty countries through in-depth polls conducted around the world. The index focuses on six core categories which go to make a nation's reputation: People, Governance, Culture, Tourism, Exports, Investment/Immigration. In the second part of this series, Anholt and Cull discuss the declining standing of the United States, while countries such as New Zealand that have handled the pandemic with greater success see a boost in their reputation.

CULL The other thing [beside the plunge of China's standing] that I was surprised by was the drop in United States from seven to ten. It's very striking that in recent years the weakness of the United States had been due to feelings about American politics and government. This time, there's weakness in the international public's response to American people. So it's like there's a contamination from one category across to the other and the people are now starting to blame the American people for the country's problems, and a feeling that they don't want to be around people who don't like each other enough to wear masks, who have such extreme levels of division within American society. Do you think this is what is bubbling to the surface? If so can it be fixed in the way that the weakness associated with the Bush years was fixed by the election of Obama. Is the election of Biden likely to bring an instant snap back in America standing because of the underlying difficulties? What's your feeling?

ANHOLT Yes, the halo or the contamination effect is well noted in the Nation Brands Index. By the end of the second term of George W. Bush a majority of people around the world considered the American landscape to be less beautiful than they did during his first term, so this effect is known. But what you're suggesting here is a little more pernicious than that. You are suggesting that people around the world are noticing, for example, that lots of Americans don't wear masks and therefore are reassessing their views of the American people. We found in the Bush years that the perception of American people did decline in his second term, but that was clearly ascribable to the perception that, first time around, his election might have been an accident, but if he gets in again, clearly the Americans want him as President. I am certain that would also have been the case had Trump been reelected. I'm certain that people around the world would have said, okay, it's not just this maverick guy: it's America itself that is crazy. We'll never know because he wasn't reelected. Will it be a harder and slower path for Biden to restore America's standing? I don't know. Time will tell. My sense is that it will be just the same as it was when Obama stepped into the White House – a very rapid return to international grace and favor – for the simple reason that such a huge majority of the global public is rooting for Biden. They want America back. They want America to be normal and decent again, a reliable multilateralist.

CULL And what about other countries in this year's NBI? It was notable that New Zealand did well. It turned up in the top five ranking for 'people'. There is clearly something that people now like about New Zealand that they hadn't noticed before.

ANHOLT Yes. On 'people' New Zealand is number five; its overall position has gone up to 12th which is notable because it was previously stable at 14th place every year.

CULL And South Korea?

ANHOLT South Korea is 23rd, continuing its upwards trajectory: it rises by one or two places almost every year, which is a remarkable and highly unusual pattern.

CULL It is interesting that New Zealand has only just moved while South Korea is a continuing trajectory. I would have thought that with South Korea's Oscar this year and their strong performance during the virus, if they were going to move dramatically, this would be their year. So it really does show that immutability in the rankings is the rule rather than the exception.

ANHOLT Indeed, but the reason why the different degrees of success that countries have had

tackling COVID has not had much of an effect on their images is simply because it's domestic stuff. Global publics don't care about domestic stuff. If I'm sitting in Ecuador or Eritrea or the United Kingdom and I'm looking at South Korea and I see that they're handling this well, possibly better than my own government, it is not necessarily going to make me change my mind about South Korea. I'm not going to suddenly start preferring South Korea across the board, just because they handle a health crisis better. Global publics already believed that countries like South Korea were potentially good at managing problems like this because they are well organized, disciplined and technologically advanced. So, what's new? It doesn't affect me because I don't live there and I think the same is probably true of New Zealand. If we see changes in the rankings of countries, it's usually because they're on a longer trajectory. And the same I think applies to America. America is on a downward trajectory and it has been for some time. So what has happened in the past year as a result of the pandemic and as a result of further behavior from Donald Trump has reinforced what the world was already starting to learn and understand and accept about the kind of country that the USA appears to have become. These are slow trajectories. It's very, very unusual for people to change their minds from year to year.

CULL It's not surprising to me that Germany remains number one in the NBI. I was, however, surprised that Britain with so many problems made it to number two.

ANHOLT Britain was higher normal in the NBI. I think it was mainly because France dropped.

CULL Yes. It struck me in previous years that people were ignoring the problems in France. This year is a reality check. Opinion is catching up with reality.

ANHOLT I have looked in slightly more detail at the French results. And what I appear to detect there is people beginning to ask: "Why do they keep on stirring up trouble? I'm sorry for the trouble that they've experienced, but why do they keep on stirring it up?" Even fellow EU members don't fully understand their principles of laïcité, secularism and all the rest of it.

CULL Interestingly, that's parallel to what went wrong for Denmark. The behavior that foreigners saw as problematic was encoded in national identity as 'their way of doing things'. The fact that foreigners didn't understand it didn't and doesn't matter.

ANHOLT And that is exactly how to make things worse rather than better. I mean, it's the same in human society. In many respects countries are like people, and the person who says 'That's just who I am... Love it or hate it. I'm not going to change' will run into difficulty.

CULL I was worried that the 2020 number might show a general disillusionment with democracy because of the attitudes on display in Western democracies towards the pandemic. Personal liberty is not the greatest thing to have at the top of the priority list when you are going into a pandemic. You want people to pull together to be prepared to sacrifice personal comfort for the benefit of neighbors. East Asian political philosophies seem to be more compatible with that. So I was pleased to see that that there wasn't a general switch away from admiration for western democracies. Canada, Switzerland and Sweden had the best scores for governance and all are associated with democracy.

ANHOLT Well, we know that Asian societies are on the whole fundamentally collectivist and the Western societies are on the whole fundamentally individualist, and this is what we're seeing being played out in response to the grand challenges of our age. In the West we've got

so much technology and money and so many incentives to try and fix these problems, yet culturally we're in a worse state to fix them than those in the East. The problem is that the problems of globalization are all collective problems, and we're not very effective at the collective level. It doesn't come naturally to the West to think collectively. And, framed in another way, this is after all China's point: look at what happens in heavily individualistic societies when everyone needs to pull together and the common good is paramount. It's like herding cats. Remember America's global score on governance? It is now 28th.

CULL Americans need to be aware of that. Their assumption is still that the USA has the most admired political system in the world. It was once, but maybe now the world has learned what it can from that system and has applied the example. Maybe now it's time to remind America of its best self and get them to live up to their principles. 28th is really alarming.

ANHOLT And the Chinese rank American governance 48th out of 50. During the election, when I was glued to CNN for too many hours a day, every time somebody said, "We are the world's greatest democracy" I found myself shouting back: "No you're bloody not."

CULL It's like the old perfume slogan: '...share the fantasy.' The problem here is that most American people have no idea how they are seen abroad. Robert Burns was right when he wrote: 'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us/To see oursels as ithers see us!' [from 'Ode to a Louse' translated to modern English as 'Oh what a power we would be given if we could see ourselves as other see us.] That is a gift that the majority of Americans have yet to embrace.

This conversation will continue next week as Anholt publishes the second index that he oversees: The Good Country Index. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Simon Anholt is an author, policy consultant and creator of both the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index and the Good Country Index. His latest book is *The Good Country Equation: How We Can Repair the World in One Generation* (2020).

Nick Cull is a Professor of Public Diplomacy at USC and a faculty fellow at CPD. His recent work includes the book *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (2019).
