

11 July 2019

The UK's international brand is being undermined by its politics



John Buck served as UK Ambassador to Portugal, having previously been Head of Public Diplomacy, Head of the Government's Communication and Information Centre during the Iraq War, and then FCO Director for Iraq. He then joined leading energy multinational BG Group as Group Director, Government and Public Affairs. At the Ambassador Partnership he specialises in the energy sector and EU issues and also delivers training and coaching in negotiation, country branding and diplomatic skills.

I had dinner recently with a visiting Argentinian friend, an anglophile who has worked for British companies, has lived in the UK, and whose daughter is married to an Englishman. He deeply regretted that all the things for which the UK was once admired - pragmatism, openness, honesty, competence and moral seriousness – seemed now to be in retreat. He suggested, only half-jokingly, that the UK increasingly resembled an unstable, emotionally-driven Latin American state.

Whether such perceptions are accurate is open to debate. But they are not based on ignorance, and they are increasingly common amongst foreign observers. Is there anything we can do about this? How does a country build and renew its reputation? Let's look at what seem to me some key principles of brand and reputation management and see what the prospects are for the UK.

National brand and national reputation are closely related, but distinct. Only a minority of countries have a genuine national brand, in the sense that they evoke a range of images and associations in the minds of foreign observers. Many people, in most countries, have a picture of the US built from personal experience, either of the country itself or of its popular culture, high-tech devices and consumer goods. The same is true of the UK, though to a lesser extent. National brands tend to be pretty robust, and to change slowly.

National brands can be enhanced by a government campaign. The less well-known you are, the more effective such a campaign can be. Perhaps the most successful programme of national 'branding' was conducted by the Estonian Government in the early 2000s, which positioned the country - of which most people knew little - as a 'new' Scandinavian (no longer Soviet) high-tech trailblazer and attractive destination.

What countries and their governments do is more important than what they say. No amount of polished public relations or advertising will compensate for negative reality. Most readers will have seen the 'Great' campaign posters in airports: 'Culture is Great Britain', 'Creativity is Great Britain', 'Innovation is Great Britain', 'Heritage is Great Britain' and so on. The campaign has always seemed to me a little too self-absorbed for comfort, but if the 'Great' campaign might once have had some merit, a degree of humility - and perhaps humour - might now be in order, given the UK's present confusion.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

National reputation has to do with political action, nationally and internationally. When a country's political leaders, and particularly its government, are seen to be behaving poorly or badly, its reputation can plummet and contaminate the national brand.

National brands may be robust, but government policy and wider political developments can still do damage. The 2019 edition of the FutureBrand Country Index, based on international survey research, has just been published and shows that the UK has fallen from 12th to 19th place in terms of positive brand value – not a disaster, but significant and rapid negative change. The FutureBrand authors report that the UK and the US are “now perceived as less inviting to tourists, visitors, students and investors, who question the policies now informing and ultimately shaping the value systems in these nations”.

Enhancing national reputation is not about spin, it's about strategy and values. In national terms, coherent strategy is sustained by a high degree of consensus about the sort of country you are, the direction in which you're heading, and the best way to make progress. It's no coincidence that the top five countries in the FutureBrand Country Index - Japan, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden and Finland - all have this. There are divisions and disagreements of course, but tensions in these countries are mitigated by a shared sense of common endeavour and values, and constrained by political processes that rest on traditions of compromise. It's difficult to argue that the UK in its current mood of angry division and polarised political fragmentation demonstrates these qualities.

Leaders matter. For good or ill political leaders embody and represent, for a period, the values of their country (Nelson Mandela was an outstanding positive example). Unfortunately, it's difficult to argue that recent UK Prime Ministers have covered themselves or their country with glory. David Cameron is widely seen as having lacked moral seriousness; Theresa May, competence. We now seem headed for a Prime Minister with little record of either. That does not augur well for our national reputation. Fortunately, we also have the Queen. Despite ups and downs, she has retained her positive reputation and supported that of her country better than any comparable figure (while, as Alastair Campbell is fond of pointing out, never giving an interview).

The prospects for the UK are at best uncertain. The UK's brand seems increasingly compromised by deep divisions and a political class that, with some notable exceptions, has failed to rise to that challenge. Its reputation is increasingly in question, as the country and its politicians are seen internationally as moving away from previous values. These developments will influence in subtle – and not so subtle - ways the decisions that myriad individuals worldwide make about which countries to visit, where to invest and study, and what to buy. While our politics remain in poor shape, and until we are seen to return to traditional standards of government and longstanding values, the UK's reputation seems certain to suffer and brand promotion to be ineffective.

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

The Ambassador Partnership LLP is a **unique specialist** partnership of former Ambassadors with unrivalled networks of influence in almost 100 countries. We provide discreet services to resolve your international problems and to improve your capacity to operate effectively wherever you need to.

We are **dispute resolution** specialists and **political risk** experts.

To discuss how we can help you to manage your political risk please call:

Tracey Stewart

Partnership Secretary

+44 (0) 7950 944 010

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com