

CHARLOTTE WERTHER

Rebranding Britain: Cool Britannia, the Millennium Dome and the 2012 Olympics¹

Introduction

The last fifteen years have seen the emergence of nation branding as an area of study. One of the leading figures in this development has been Simon Anholt, who, in his own words, first used the phrase ‘nation brand’ in 1996,² and developed an index³ that ranks the strength of nations’ images or brands on the basis of six dimensions. Much debated has been the issue of whether it makes sense *and* is at all feasible to engage in the process of turning around the image of a nation as is suggested by the term nation branding.⁴ In his recent book Anholt even states that “there is no such thing as ‘nation branding’”, and that “[i]t’s only when people start talking about *branding* rather than just *brand* that the problems start”.⁵ So what seems to have become more generally agreed is that whether it wants to or not, “a nation’s ‘brand’ exists, with or without any conscious efforts in nation branding, as each country has a certain image to its international audience, be it strong or weak, current or outdated, clear or vague”⁶, whereas *nation branding* as “a quick fix for a weak or negative national image”⁷ is illusory.

Anholt has endeavoured to launch the alternative phrase of ‘competitive identity’, and the terms ‘reputation management’ or ‘nation image management’⁸ have also been suggested, and Fan ventures the following definition: “Nation branding is a process by which a nation’s images can be created or altered, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to enhance the country’s reputation among a target international audience”.⁹ In other words, nation brands or images

¹ I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer and Martine Gertsen, Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School for very helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

² Anholt, Simon. *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. p. 3.

³ Anholt GfK Roper Nation Brands Index™.

⁴ Fan, Ying. “Branding the nation: What is being branded” *Place Branding and public diplomacy*, vol. 4(2) 2006.

⁵ Anholt, op.cit. pp. 1 and 4.

⁶ Fan, Ying. “Branding the nation: Towards a better understanding” *Place Branding and public diplomacy*, vol. 6(2) 2010. p. 98.

⁷ Anholt. op.cit. p.3.

⁸ See van Ham, Peter. “Place Branding: The State of the Art” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 616(1) 2008. p. 129 and Fan op.cit. p. 101.

⁹ See Anholt, Simon. *Competitive identity: The new brand management for nations, cities and regions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 and Fan 2010. op.cit. p. 101.

Beijing; he was replaced by the new Conservative mayor Boris Johnson, but may in fact be back for the Olympic opening ceremony if he wins the mayoral elections in May 2012. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who, along with a number of Cabinet colleagues, was not easily persuaded that bidding was such a good idea, will not be around as PM to take credit in 2012.⁷⁸ Instead, his government was blamed for soaring costs, and staunch promoter of the Games, then Olympics minister Tessa Jowell, was heavily criticised in November 2008 when she admitted that “[h]ad we known what we know now (about the recession), would we have bid for the Olympics? Almost certainly not.”⁷⁹

Nevertheless, London 2012 seems more likely to prove a popular success than Cool Britannia and the Millennium Dome. In spite of criticisms, the process of bidding for, organising and eventually staging the Olympic Games has been a more engaging experience with its focus on bottom-up and participatory elements and its more inclusive approach. As a result, a major sports event like this potentially provides the “celebratory moments [that] offer an opportunity for “national reassessment” of Britain’s sense of itself and of its relation to the world”⁸⁰ necessary to engage locals and the nation at large and make them support and temporarily live the brand. Whether the Games will also leave a permanent imprint on British minds and hearts and change British identity fundamentally in the process is a different matter.

⁷⁸ Campbell. op.cit.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Hart, Simon. “Olympics Minister Tessa Jowell tries to paper over London 2012 Games gaffe.” *The Telegraph*. 13 November 2008.

⁸⁰ Newman. Op.cit. p. 262, drawing on Philips op.cit. p. 107.