

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Managing Caribbean reputational damage

All Caribbean nations have well developed contingency plans in the event of a natural disaster. However, few have established procedures to address the issue of the damage caused to a nation's image and reputation.

Yet that is just what is required if the Caribbean is not to experience long term economic and political damage from the type of campaign that is underway against the Bahamas over the alleged mistreatment of detainees.

What follows is not to seek to minimise the ill treatment of anyone; or to question the importance of freedom to comment; or to avoid suggesting that nations in the region need to get their houses in order and observe international norms. Rather it is to make clear that the need for reputational management has changed absolutely and governments need to consider how they should react politically and professionally.

News and comment are now instant and global, and social media, twenty four hour rolling news channels, and the internet, have enabled cross-border citizen activism.

For the most part Caribbean governments seem transfixed by this, unable to respond in real time, or to recognise that opinions and news items on You Tube or Twitter can go viral in hours, and that their traditional and often pedestrian response, let alone an entrenched desire to brush aside bad news, is no longer adequate.

Neither do those in the region who seek to manipulate situations for domestic political advantage, appear to recognise that. In some cases, what may appear usefully self-serving in relation to sensitive domestic issues such as the probity of the police service or matters relating to migrants, also have an external dimension that may have wider political and economic consequences.

The case of the Bahamas is informative. In March of this year, protests began in Miami about the need for better treatment of a group of Cuban women being held in a detention centre previously the subject of concern and investigation by Amnesty International. Later, in June, the protests escalated after a video circulated in Miami showed, it was alleged, Cuban detainees being beaten by guards at the same detention centre.

In response a group of anti-Cuban, Cuban-American activists, the Democracy Movement, began to organise demonstrations outside the Bahamas consulate in Miami and began to take other actions to obtain publicity. Their cause was supported by Cuban-American politicians, who not only have significant influence in the US Congress, but include in their number a future US Presidential candidate. More recently their protests have escalated to include representations to the cruise ship companies and demonstrations aimed at departing cruise ship passengers.

Throughout, the issue has not been helped by the response of the Bahamas government which went from denial, to seeming misinformation, to anger, to announcing a public enquiry, to returning the detainees who might have given evidence, to unfortunately voiced exasperation on the part of government about what to do next: all against a background of representations from the US

Government, the deepening involvement of human rights NGOs, and opposition criticism then support.

While hopefully an enquiry commissioned by the Bahamas Government will be thorough and honest, the allegations, as Amnesty's International's involvements indicates, are serious and, irrespective of the political complexities associated with the nationality of those involved, should be answered sooner rather than later.

What stands out as a lesson to other governments is how reaction, if not thought through, can actually exacerbate a situation and far from closing down an issue, can add fuel to the fire, turning it into a matter unlikely to be forgotten and which in this case, in time, may come to affect Bahamas-US relations.

In its own way the event is a tip of an iceberg of potential damage that the Caribbean has the capacity to self-inflict, unaware that the world is watching. Whether the region likes it or not, tourism and the tourism industry is its Achilles heel; one that will become subject to constant external attack if the region fails in meeting international norms in everything from human rights to health and safety.

At the heart of the issue is a failure to understand what tourism, brand creation and reputation now mean in a world in which, perhaps unfortunately, perception has come to matter more than reality.

Tourist boards, governments and the industry across the world spend millions of dollars to create a positive picture of 'The Caribbean Experience': a sense that all is well in a country and that a destination and a vacation will be a happy and memorable experience.

But recently, damaging coverage about the unfortunate reality of crime, sexual assault, and the behaviour of some police and immigration officers has led pressure groups and the media in key feeder markets to begin to question safety, disseminating messages that cannot be controlled and, if inaccurate, are hard to refute.

Incidents apart, one element of the problem lies in the fact that increasing numbers of visitors are coming to expect the politics, the judicial system, personal safety, and the rule of law to be equivalent to where they reside, and for their government or embassy to afford them the same protection and treatment as they might receive at home.

This is particularly the case when it comes to North American and European travellers who in a sometimes over simplistic manner travel the world expecting the same behaviour, basic rights, responses, norms and safety to match what they have in the wealthy developed nations from which they have come.

But beyond this, and more alarmingly for a tourism-dependent region, has been the appearance of the first social media campaigns mounted by NGOs that actively aim to turn visitors against specific countries. For example, in the case of the Maldives, there is a global campaign which has near to 2m supporters including Sir Richard Branson, proposing a tourism boycott, and raising funds to develop an advertising campaign which, it says, will aim to 'threaten the islands' reputation'.

The point here is not to suggest that governments should hide or find ways to exonerate themselves from the consequence of their responsibilities; it is to indicate that apart from ensuring that abuses do not occur, that only a well considered, fair, rapid, appropriate and measured response will avoid such situations become becoming potent and damaging.

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