In the past 12 months both Australia and New Zealand have faced a plethora of unprecedented, devastating and complex crisis’s that have highlighted the respective nations’ ability to respond under pressure.

In March of 2019, 50 people were killed alongside multiple injured in a mass shooting at a Christchurch mosque. In mid-to-late 2019 the Australian community faced an unprecedented bushfire season, with funds and resources scare, entire suburbs and national parks burnt to the ground.

Now both nations, alongside the rest of the international community, must respond rapidly and appropriately to the unfolding 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Scott Morrison and Jacinda Ardern’s capacity to protect their nations from rocketing cases of the virus whilst dealing with the economic repercussions of this pandemic has solidified the respect and trust each nation has for their respective leader. XXXX

Jacinda Ardern was able to gain the trust and respect of her fellow New Zealanders in her genuine and sincere response to the Christchurch mass shootings. Ardern promptly addressed the shooter stating, “You may have chosen us – but we utterly reject and condemn you”.

Ardern’s response to the right-wing extremists attack and the solidarity she displayed with Muslim communities received international praise. Acknowledging her country was affected by the devastation, Ardern promised her citizens that within 10 days of the shooting the government would review and reform gun legislation in New Zealand.

True to her word, Ardern imposed tighter restrictions on gun ownership in New Zealand, and did what she could to comfort and protect a grieving nation by remaining open and transparent throughout the crisis.

In the wake of the event Ardern promised the families of each victim that she would cover the cost of funerals for each of their loved ones.

Ardern’s decisive and prompt actions showed New Zealanders that they were not alone in the trying times of such a devastating act of terrorism.

Later in the year it was Australia’s turn to face the unprecedented bushfire season of 2019-20. Immediately Australian citizens lost faith in the government’s ability to appropriately address the scale of the fires when prime minister Scott Morrison flew to Hawaii in the midst of the crisis for a family holiday.

On his return, videos circulated online of Morrison attempting to win good PR in fire effected communities – however he was met with the anger and desperation of people on the frontline that were robbed of adequate resources and funding.

Morrison and the Liberal Party then promptly reacted by airing a series of TV ad’s regarding the funding they provided frontline services, all while neglecting to inform citizens of the cuts they had made in previous years to these very services.

With criticism over the lack of leadership shown the in-fighting’s of the Liberal party became centre stage – with the federal government arguing the onus to be on the state government and the state government claiming the nation emergency to require more federal action.

The lack of leadership, planning and funding shown during the bushfire crisis by the government saw a surge of community initiative and support that allowed Australians to band together in the months of wildfires.

Now in the early months of 2020 the two nations face the reality of a global pandemic. Whilst it is critical to acknowledge the COVID-19 crisis is within the early stages in both Australia and New Zealand and the situation is still unfolding, the decisions made in the coming days and weeks will determine the severity in both nations.

New Zealand’s response beginning with the initial case of COVID-19 in the country has been rigid, implementing serious measures to ensure that the spread is minimal. Ardern, acting on the feedback of her nation acknowledged that information was continuously changing, and people were confused as to what they should be doing.

Acknowledging this Ardern begun a series of Facebook videos each day in which she updates citizens on all things related to the pandemic. New Zealand also was one of the first nations to impose strict quarantine and travel bans soon after identifying their first COVID-19 case.

Ardern has announced that schools and universities will be closing as of the 24th of March. Anticipating the confusion this will cause for young people, Ardern has held a press conference specifically for children alongside scientist Dr Michelle Dickinson who specialises in the communication of science to children and Dr Siouxsie Wiles who has become a familiar calming voice in times of New Zealand crisis.

This depth of understanding of what her nation is feeling shows Ardern’s ability to use her personal family life and her professional career to address concerns happening within homes across New Zealand. Whilst the situation still unfolds in New Zealand the nation has yet to reach the excessive issues of panic buying seen in other parts of the world. On the 23rd of March New Zealand COVID-19 cases sit at 102, ranking them in the lower end of official recorded cases.

Comparatively, on the 23rd of March Australian COVID-19 cases sat at 1709 – whilst this must be looked at relative to population size, it is undeniable the exponential trajectory Australia is on. The Australian Federal government thus far has had a softer and slower transitional approach to dealing with the outbreak of COVID-19 – with the economy and businesses in mind the ceasing of trading has been much more gradual. Australia is instructing individuals returning from overseas to self-isolate for 14 days, something that has been criticised from the beginning with many Australians not taking this rule seriously. In the early days of the pandemic within Australia, the nation has seen a sweep of panic buying, something likely brought on by inconsistent and conflicting information from the government. Morrison addressed this phase of panic buying and hoarding as “un-Australian” before scolding the Australian public on his disappointment in their behaviour. Panic buying reached a problematic peak on the 19th of March with asthma puffers and paracetamol selling out across the majority of pharmacies. In order to address the shortages of stock and hoarding the government-imposed restrictions of the purchasing of pharmaceuticals, limiting patients to a month supply of their medication. With the closing of thousands of industries many Australians are left with no income but the enduring burden of rent or mortgage repayments. The Morrison government announced welfare payments for those effected citizens, however on 22nd-23rd of March, the day this was implemented and ready for access, the website in which citizens must process applications went offline due to an inundation of users – causing Centrelink lines across the country. Morrison’s press conference is being criticised by citizens across the nation as they lack genuine substance and action on what the government is or is planning on doing. Rather than Morrison making decisive action on the closure of schools and the definitions of essential services, he continues to tell Australian that we will “build a bridge”. Now as the COVID-19 crisis continues to worse the federal and state governments are at odds when it comes to essential decisions such as the closure of borders and schools. Some Australian states such as Tasmania and South Australia have made the executive decision to close their borders to non-essential travel. Whereas in New South Wales the Premier advised parents to not send their children to school despite them remaining open. Similarly, to the issues of jurisdiction and onus seen in the bushfire crisis, state governments are again making executive decision in lieu of federal action.

One of the most remarkable points of difference between Ardern and Morrison is not in their actions per say, but the respect the nations citizens have for their elected leaders choices. Australia and New Zealand undoubtably have to approach the COVID-19 outbreak respectively to their domestic situation, considering the population, industries and so forth of the nation. However, the decisiveness and ability to react promptly and informed will determine the outcomes from the global pandemic.