



## **Changing Times: Public Issues and Private Troubles**

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Few people in the UK expected the Brexit outcome of the referendum on EU membership in June 2016. Those who toyed with the possibility that this could happen could not have imagined the change to UK life the day after. They may have thought that it would take time to sort out the details of leaving the EU but that life for individuals would continue without much problem. When the result came and disbelief subsided, the reality for some, although not all, were changes of significant proportions. This is a brief story of a family whose livelihood and way of life was changed quite suddenly on 24 June, 2016, the day after the vote. The story tells of the economic and career implications but also the soft changes, in relationships, in identities, and in what it feels to be British. In short, it is an example of what Wright-Mills (1959) described as the relationship between public issues and private troubles.

The family in this story is of mixed race: one side being a mixture of Sri Lankan, English, Irish, and French, and the other South American and English. Moreover, the extended family includes a Spanish teacher and a younger generation embedded in European, multi-lingual, and trans-national careers. Alan had built his company, a communications agency, from three people in 1990 to 25 people in 2015. From a mainly UK based company supporting the marketing of healthcare products and services, the company quickly established a European network with five other agencies across the EU. By 2010 the majority of clients were those in China, US, and other countries who

wanted to work with a company based in the UK (English-speaking) but who could launch and market products across Europe. This proved to be a successful profile for a company competing with larger agencies for a decreasing amount of business and with smaller margins. So the survival and success of this small company was something that Alan was very proud of and the close team of creatives and account managers shared in its success. The European partners also thrived as they also had access to English-speaking markets such as the US.

When the government announced its intention to have a referendum some potential clients were nervous, but no one really expected there to be a long term impact. Many said "wait and see" and Alan thought that once the referendum was over these too would return to the negotiation table and new business would be secured. As the referendum approached it was clear how close the vote was going to be. Conversations with old friends and people in the community highlighted surprising attitudes towards foreigners, which had not previously been voiced. It was as though feelings and beliefs that had lain dormant had been given life and respectability. Some of these ideas were perhaps encouraged and driven by political discourses, but also political aims gave voice to the ideas; the two fed on each other and it grew. Many watched, not believing that in Britain such lack of tolerance and concern for our fellow human beings in need around the world would be allowed to take hold and prosper.

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In 2016 Alan was in his late 50s and he had thought that in a few years he would sell his company and work part time, or do something completely different. The company had been valued at a considerable sum that would allow him to do this. However, as the referendum approached it was clear that should the result be “pro leave”, the bulk of his business, bridging as it did the EU with the “rest of the world”, would be lost. The value of the company was fragile. So to future-proof his own future and that of his family, he and his wife bought a travel franchise with a view to growing that over the coming years and to be their insurance. This proved to be a very good decision. On the morning after the referendum, the UK woke to discover that by a small margin Brexit had won. The nervous markets crashed and many of Alan’s current customers said that although they would see to fruition the projects that they were involved in (product launches, exhibitions, etc.), they would not be continuing with the company in the future as there was no way of knowing how long the UK would be remaining in the EU. Potential businesses that had been waiting to see what happened dried up completely; many going to English-speaking companies in Germany and Sweden. Overnight the value of the company disappeared.

Alan and a skeleton staff completed the work that was left. At the same time, Alan launched his new travel company to ensure that when the income from the agency was no more there would be another income developing.

Now after 5 months the agency is no more. There was no value in it and so each member of this 26-year-old team has gone their separate ways. Some younger colleagues have found other positions but older ones have become freelancers. The travel company is gradually establishing a customer base but the funds that Alan and his family had looked forward to as security in their retirement is not there. Beyond the career and livelihood implications there are other changes that perhaps are even deeper in their significance and impact. Some relationships are viewed now with different eyes; beliefs and attitudes once vigorously expressed cannot easily be forgotten. For mixed race people and families and those of second generation migrants the animosity expressed towards “the other” is recognised and internalised, and echoes of the “River of Blood” speech from Enoch Powell in the late 1960s resonate again.

This is just one story of a British family whose life changed on 23 June, 2016. There are, no doubt, those for whom no tangible change took place. Many look forward to what they believe will be a better future for the UK: less globalised and more self-reliant. For some, the changes will be even more profound; they fear they will have to return to their home countries, lose their jobs and futures. Others have experienced racist attacks: verbal and physical. However for this family, its company and employees and directors, it is the end of a successful and enjoyable chapter in their lives. Moreover, it has led them to reassess their nation, what it stands for, and how its people wish to relate to the rest of the world, and to them.

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