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WHEN BEING BRITISH MEANS JOINING THE B-LIST

It's hard to be a British marketer at the moment. Everywhere we turn there seems to be trouble and decay. Our political leaders are signalling that the years ahead are going to be very tough and many of the brands that this country once took unmitigated pride in are now a source of national angst. In branding the very prefix "British" has suddenly become the proverbial albatross for many of the companies that carry the connection in their name.

Top of a seemingly growing list is British Telecom, which now faces its first national strike in almost a quarter of a century. If the Communication Workers Union does opt for industrial action in July, thousands of households could find themselves without phone or internet access for days.

Prolonged strike action will surely encourage many customers to switch their accounts to one of the 170 rival brands that compete in the domestic British phone market.

How BT must yearn for the good old days back in 1996 when 90% of British households used BT for their phone service. Back then shares in BT were worth three times their current value and the brand, thanks to Bob Hoskins and the "It's good to talk" campaign, was voted Britain's strongest by marketers in a poll in 1996.

But BT is not the only British brand that must now be looking back wistfully at 1996. British Airways was also in a completely different shape back then too. It had just been voted the world's best airline in the annual Business Traveller survey – marking the seventh year in succession that BA had been voted the best business class carrier.

Better still, its leading service and world class brand had enabled BA to become astonishingly profitable. The airline made a pre-tax profit of £473m in 1996 – that's more than a billion pounds better than Willie Walsh managed this year when he had to report a loss of £531m.

And then, of course, there is BP. No brand must wish for the past more than it. Back in 1996, John Browne had just completed his first year as chief executive of British Petroleum, as it then was, and had begun to revolutionise BP with a combination of strong leadership and savvy decision-making. Within a year, Browne would give a speech in which he would become the first leader of a major oil company to acknowledge the impact of climate change.

BP also began its long and successful journey of acquisition and expansion that would see the company increase in value from \$45bn in 1996 to

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\$250bn in 2005. Now, thanks to the Deepwater Horizon crisis, BP's sterling reputation and its value have plummeted to such a degree that it now seems that BP's very future is in doubt.

And so we reach an uncomfortable question. Is it coincidence that three of Britain's strongest and once most loved brands are in such deep trouble? Or is there something about being British at the moment which spells doom and gloom for the brands that are linked to it?

Establishing causality makes this a complex question. Is British Airways bringing down the reputation of Britain? Or is it Britain, and its various economic woes, which is diminishing the status of BA? Perhaps in a more complex analysis we would acknowledge that the symbiotic relationship between a nation state and the brands associated with it can become a cyclical exchange of negative associations with each weakening the other.

Clearly back in 1996, being British was a bonus. It was a golden time. Yes, England was knocked out of our own Euro96 championship by the Germans, but it came after an exciting series of performances that puts our recent South African exploits into depressing perspective. The Spice Girls had their first number one. David Beckham appeared on the scene with his wonder goal against Wimbledon. Within a year, Vanity Fair would put Liam Gallagher and Patsy Kensit on the cover of their magazine and Alexander McQueen and the team from Loaded inside its pages, proclaiming: "London Swings Again!"

The intervening 14 years have not been kind to Britain or those associated with the heady days of 1996. Patsy and Liam got divorced. Loaded is now on its last legs. And McQueen is, alas, dead. And the great British brands that were enjoying their finest hours during the mid-Nineties are now enduring some of the hardest and most fraught periods in corporate memory.

If we accept the fundamental premise that the brands which carry a country within their identity are bolstered by that association during the good times, then we must also accept that as that country enters a more austere period these brands will also struggle. Britain is about to become a country of much lower economic prowess and international standing – of that there is no doubt.

Those brands which once basked in the sunshine of a reborn nation, must now shiver in the deep dark night to which the country is surely heading. ●