

HOME CALLS

Should I stay or should I go?

It's the question facing thousands of South Africans torn between the lifestyle on offer at home and the earning potential of Britain

WORDS AMY FALLON

When Brent Weldon moved to London from Cape Town in 1999, he knew plenty of South African mates he could have a beer with. Today, his social network of South Africans is dwindling.

"My problem is that I'm running out of [South African] friends in London," says the 32-year-old Clapham-based businessman from Llandudno. "Most of them have gone back, and of the friends that do live here, all are planning to go back."

Given spiralling crime rates, job insecurity and the Aids epidemic that has plagued the country in the post-apartheid era, it may come as a surprise that more South Africans are contemplating, and making, the move home.

Those problems aside, South Africans are proud of the Rainbow Nation, and argue it boasts a lifestyle that London doesn't. They say business at home is booming and the country has never been filled with so much optimism.

Although Weldon admits the idea of leaving London after seven years is daunting, it's not a question of if but when he'll head home.

"We all want to go home, we're all desperate to go home, but it is a bit of a jump," he says of the predicament facing South Africans who have been based in the UK for long periods. "You [do] just find the people that are exceptionally happy here [in London], exceptionally happy in their work, making an absolute fortune and they're saying 'I could never make this sort of money in South Africa'." [But] there's no question in my mind. I'm going back and I'm trying to set a time frame."

Weldon came to London for the experience and to start his own business — not because of crime or affirmative action, now called Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). In fact, while some South Africans might have political motivation for leaving, he thinks it's a poor excuse.

"None of my friends actually started looking for jobs before they came here, so I think that's a little bit of a copout to hear people say 'I'm leaving to go to the UK because of affirmative action'," he says. "My friends that are based in SA aren't complaining about it. I haven't got friends sitting around braais complaining people are taking their jobs." ▶



Brent Weldon



Nikki Emerton