

# Meet the real Alexander Nix. An interview with the notorious former head of Cambridge Analytica

*A year after the downfall of the data company, its former head is ready to talk*

**Freddy Gray**

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If you have heard of Alexander Nix, you probably think he's a villain. He is the former head of Cambridge Analytica, the data analytics company that helped Donald Trump win the presidential election. Nix and his colleagues have been accused of all sorts of other dastardly deeds: conniving with the Kremlin to hack democracy, 'dark messaging' people with racist ads on Facebook in the run-up to Brexit, and more and worse. Nix lost his job after a Channel 4 investigation into Cambridge Analytica in March last year — the exposé won a Bafta last weekend. By May, Cambridge Analytica and its parent company SCL had gone into administration, and Nix had been widely condemned as a Machiavellian crook.

A year has passed, and Nix is ready to talk. I meet him in the Ladbroke Arms, near his house in Notting Hill. He's invariably described as an Old Etonian — the implication being that he's a smooth creep. Like many OEs, however, Nix is in reality quite neurotic: sometimes charming, sometimes awkward. He orders chips — 'Why not?' — but doesn't eat them. He fiddles with his coiffed hair and his car keys. He also stammers, often saying the same word three times over. He admits that as a child he had 'an overabundance of energy and interest', but he doesn't want to talk about himself today. He wants to talk about what he calls 'wrongs that need righting'.

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somewhat evasively, adding that his company had always approached marketing through a combination of ‘big data and psych-ology’.

Whatever the truth, it seems a bit much to suggest — as a great many people have — that Cambridge Analytica and similar firms somehow mind-hacked the American and British electorates. Nix says that using the company was effective for Trump: ‘Like it or not, this was a data-driven election that Trump ran. He spent around \$120 million on digital. Every single dollar was placed by my team or Cambridge employees. The data was being used to inform important questions about what to message, what to say, where to hold rallies and who to target.’

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business. And this was his retribution.'

Wylie is now a consultant for the fashion brand H&M and flies around the world making speeches about the internet. Sometimes whistleblowing pays.

Nix dresses like a Euro playboy in relaxation mode — tight white chinos, blue V-neck. But he is married 'very happily' to Olympia Paus, a Norwegian shipping heiress; they have three children.

He doesn't appreciate certain lines of questioning and has a Tony Blair-like habit of starting difficult answers with 'Look...'. He's uncomfortable when asked about the Channel 4 documentary, which filmed him boasting about the dirty tricks SCL could

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only ones to do so.

The broader point is that nobody knows what is right or wrong when it comes to internet privacy. Nix himself is quite vague on the matter. He agrees with Elizabeth Denham that our societies need ‘an ethical pause’ on data usage. ‘Coming from a Cambridge Analytica person,’ he says, ‘you might think that strange, but we’re about to move into really another level of data... I think the regulators, by definition, are always responding to what is happening [now]. They need to look ahead, not fight yesterday’s war.’

What a ‘pause’ means is not clear. Nix is quick to add that ‘the sort of data that we held on people wasn’t that sensitive — it wasn’t bank records or health records... Personally, if someone knows what car I drive, it’s not the end of the world.’

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