



By: Harvey Morris

Right-wing Reform UK is more pressure group than party in waiting



The British electoral system is notoriously hostile to political insurgents who seek to disrupt a two-party system in which either the Conservatives or Labour have dominated parliament for a hundred years.

In occasional by-elections, two of which are taking place this week, local voters sometimes take the liberty, however, of thumbing their noses at both major parties by opting for an outsider.

Attention this week is focused on the likelihood of Labour seizing control in two constituencies that were previously considered safe territory for the ruling Conservatives.

In both contests, the hard-pressed Conservatives are facing a secondary challenge on the right from Reform UK, the renamed Brexit Party that is currently hovering at around 10 per cent in national opinion polls.

It is a chance for local voters to express both their disillusionment with the Conservative government and their lack of faith in Labour by voting for outsiders, including Reform.

In the Midlands' market town of Wellingborough, the speculation has been that Reform could perform well enough in this week's by-election to push the Conservatives into third place.

Fertile soil for radical populism

Although Reform presently has no seat in Parliament, up to one-in-nine voters would apparently be prepared to vote for it at a general election, **according** to the most optimistic of the polls.

With ballots yet to be cast, some commentators were already predicting that growing popularity of the populist right-wing Reform would herald a sea-change in UK politics.

In The Telegraph, Sherelle Jacobs **suggested**

the UK was potentially more fertile soil for radical populism than Italy, where right-wing former outsider Giorgia Meloni is now prime minister, or the Netherlands, where a general election in November awarded the largest number of seats to Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom.

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In their evident enthusiasm, right-wing pundits may be over-estimating the attractions of the radical right to the current British electorate and making false comparisons with the rise of right-wing populists elsewhere in Europe.

The outcomes of a series of national elections in continental Europe this year could lead to the further fragmentation of coalition governments amid a general trend towards the right. Far-right parties are meanwhile looking forward to making substantial gains in European Parliament elections in June.

The UK, meanwhile, looks set to elect a centre-left Labour party that is fairly confident of securing a working majority at Westminster and a five-year mandate. Not for the first time, the UK may be defying a European political trend.

Right-wing pressure

In the context of the coming UK general election, most votes for Reform will be gained at the expense of the Conservatives.

Even if Reform matches the predictions of the most optimistic opinion polls on general election day, it could still end up with no seats at Westminster, given the constraints of Britain's constituency-based, first-past-the-

post electoral system.

That is not to say that it could not have significant influence while remaining outside Parliament.

After all, it was right-wing pressure spearheaded by the UK Independence Party that led in 2013 to the then prime minister, David Cameron, promising a referendum on Britain's European Union membership.

UKIP leader Nigel Farage became one of the most influential UK politicians never to have been elected to Westminster when a majority of voters in 2016 supported his 'leave' campaign at a time when both the main parties favoured remaining in Europe.



With or without Nigel Farage, Reform aims to present candidates in every constituency at the general election. But, post-Brexit, what does it actually stand for?

It was a referendum in which UKIP placed opposition to immigration at the centre of its campaign.

Farage stepped down from UKIP but later helped found the new Brexit party to campaign for a no-deal divorce from the EU during the contentious debates over the future relationship.

The Brexit party rebranded itself as Reform UK after Britain's formal 2020 departure from the EU. Farage **stepped down** from the leadership in 2021, remaining as the party's honorary president.

There has been growing speculation in recent months that Farage might return to the

political fray. He has coyly avoided ruling out a comeback as leader of Reform and has not completely rejected suggestions he might rejoin the Conservative party of which he was once a member.

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After its rebranding, Reform focused on attacking Covid lockdown measures in a campaign that failed to gain traction with the public. Its current pledges include less immigration, less tax and less crime. Its ideology is close to that of many right-wing Conservatives, some of whom have already defected to its ranks.

Reform's war on "woke"

As in the Brexit campaign, Reform's future may be to act, as UKIP did then, to push the Conservative party further to the right. In its wildest dreams, it may even envisage one day replacing the Conservatives as the main party of the right.

As far as the next general election is concerned, however, its expectations are near to zero in terms of seats.

The electoral system is against it, as are around 9 in 10 of British voters, who are more focussed on crumbling, underfunded public services, while they patiently wait to see the promised benefits of Brexit, than they are in joining Reform's war on "woke".

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Surveys suggest that on the right's hot button issue of immigration, the UK electorate, particularly the young, has a more relaxed

outlook than nearly all its European neighbours.

A good showing in this week's by-elections may offer Reform an opportunity to declare that its brand of right-wing populism is on the march. It might do better to reflect on the outcome of the 2015 general election, in which UKIP secured more than 12 per cent of votes but only one seat at Westminster.

A much depleted and now almost forgotten UKIP is just about hanging on and is putting a candidate up at a second by-election in the southwestern constituency of Kingswood this week. Its main interest there may be not to lose its deposit.