

UK Independence Party selects new leader as post-Brexit crisis deepens

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The UK Independence Party (UKIP) finally elected a new leader this week, after two ballots in as many months.

Paul Nuttall, a former history lecturer and Member of the European Parliament, won 62.6 percent of the vote. Despite having been deputy party leader for six years, he is a virtual unknown as the UKIP brand has been synonymous with former City trader, Nigel Farage.

Parodying US President-elect Donald Trump, Nuttall pledged to “put the great back into Britain” and to turn UKIP into an “electoral force”—largely at the expense of the Labour Party.

In reality, Farage’s departure as party leader after the successful campaign for Britain’s exit from the European Union (EU) in the June referendum has left UKIP rudderless. Nuttall’s own victory was largely due to his being the last one standing.

Diane James, MEP for South East England, had been elected as UKIP leader on September 19. Her landslide victory came after she won the backing of Farage and Arron Banks, UKIP’s multimillionaire donor. They backed James as a safe pair of hands after their preferred candidate, Steven Woolfe, was barred from standing in the contest on a technicality.

Woolfe’s barring was indicative of deep tensions and factional rivalry within the organisation. James stood down after just 18 days in the job, on October 5, saying that she could not exert her authority over the party. The following day, Woolfe was hospitalised after a reported altercation with a fellow UKIP MEP, after a party meeting in the European parliament in Strasbourg.

Woolfe collapsed during a vote in the meeting, hours after he had allegedly been involved in a confrontation with Mike Hookem. The altercation came after Woolfe reportedly said he had considered defecting to the Conservative Party, before deciding to run in the UKIP leadership contest. Woolfe subsequently resigned from

UKIP, as did James. Both now sit as Independents in the European Parliament.

James’ resignation meant that Farage had to act as interim leader while the second leadership race that ended with Nuttall’s victory took place.

Like many of UKIP’s leading spokesperson, Nuttall hails originally from the Conservative Party. His opposition to Brussels is combined with eulogies to unrestrained capitalism, and calls for a war against “cultural Marxists.” A staunch Catholic, he is anti-abortion and supports a referendum on the return of the death penalty. Nuttall has praised moves to privatise the National Health Service, telling Sky News that it “is a monolithic hangover from days gone by and unfortunately or fortunately shall I say, we are becoming an older population and quite frankly I would like to see more free market introduced into the health service.”

Nuttall, who is from Liverpool, claims that UKIP will champion “working class people.” Douglas Carswell, another Tory defector and UKIP’s only Westminster MP, claimed UKIP would lead an “anti-oligarch insurgency” as “heirs to the Levellers” in the English civil war.

But neither Nuttall nor his party offer any social policies that will alleviate the massive decline in living standards among working people after eight years of austerity, and nothing whatsoever for the youth. Nuttall’s promotion of anti-immigrant and law and order rhetoric is a right-wing populist veneer for the defence of the interests of British capital against the working class.

Carswell claims that the key feature of the 21st century is the degree to which technology has fundamentally transformed “the relationship between the governed and the governing.”

The “coming of broadband and digital communication” has led to the “emergence of a new class of citizen-consumer,” he claims. Just as Netflix and Amazon have made “self-selection a cultural norm,” so public services

must be re-ordered accordingly.

Such a policy translates into the final dismantling of universal social provision and handover to the private sector and cannot mobilise significant support. That is why Nuttall made clear that the central plank of UKIP's campaign over the immediate period would be the demand for Britain's immediate exit from the EU, combined with anti-Muslim propaganda and the whipping up of "English patriotism."

Gerard Batten MEP has been appointed UKIP spokesman on Brexit (British Exit from the EU). He attacked Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May as someone who had supported a Remain vote in the referendum and who "cannot be trusted to deliver our withdrawal from the EU." UKIP was opposed to triggering Article 50, which begins the two-year process of negotiations with the EU over Britain's terms of exit, he said. Instead, Parliament should repeal the European Communities Act (1972) in order to "restore law-making supremacy to the UK Parliament and put the British Government in the driving seat of negotiations not the EU."

Behind the demagogy, UKIP is in deep crisis. In addition to divisions within the organisation, party donations have crashed. Between July and September, UKIP raised just £43,000, less than the extreme-right British National Party, which has no parliamentary representation. UKIP claims that this is because many donors concentrated on funding the Leave campaign in the EU referendum. But the party has reportedly lost 14,000 members in the past year and a half, as the Tories have adopted its political agenda wholesale.

In addition, the UKIP-controlled Alliance for Direct Democracy in Europe—a group in the European Parliament—has been accused of mispending more than half a million euros (£427,000) of taxpayers' money by financing Farage's attempt to win a Westminster seat in the 2015 General Election and the anti-EU referendum campaign. The Alliance has been asked to return €172,655, and will miss out on €248,345 in grants as a result, deepening UKIP's financial crisis.

Most importantly, Arron Banks has threatened to walk away from UKIP. He was part of the welcoming party, led by Farage, which travelled to New York to congratulate Trump immediately on his becoming president-elect. The insurance tycoon subsequently said he was planning to fund 200 candidates to "drain the swamp" of careerists and corruption in Parliament. He told the *Times* that the plan was to draw up an

"undesirability" rating to target sitting MPs. "It would be highly amusing to tease career politicians with a hot poker," he said.

UKIP's crisis is in sharp contrast to Farage's personal fortunes. Trump's suggestion that he would make the "ideal" UK ambassador to Washington drew outrage from the government. It was regarded as an unprecedented intrusion into British political life and a barely disguised demand for the sacking of the current ambassador, Sir Kim Darroch.

Farage continues to insist that he would be able to negotiate a better UK-US trade deal under a Trump presidency, with his backers accusing the May government of "arrogance" and mendacity in blocking him for the job.

Last week, Farage was afforded a champagne-fuelled party in his honour at the luxurious Ritz hotel in London. Those attending included Banks and the billionaire Barclay brothers, Sir David and Sir Fredrick, owners of the Ritz and the *Telegraph* newspaper. Lord Ashcroft—former deputy chairman of the Conservative Party and billionaire tax exile—helped bankroll the event, along with property entrepreneur and co-founder of Leave EU, Richard Tice, and Lord Pearson, former Tory turned one-time UKIP leader.

Farage told the gathering that he suspected "the Conservative party is not fit for the legacy of Brexit. I suspect there is going to be a genuine realignment of British politics over the course of the next three or four years. ... There are great battles to be fought and I'm going to go on fighting those battles."

The former UKIP leader is planning another visit to Washington next month to meet with the "transition team" who are preparing for Trump's move to the White House in January. The *Express* reported that he has also lined up 20 speaking events in the US for the next year, "which could see him rake in a fortune." A friend of Farage was cited by the newspaper, stating, "It is churlish to say he isn't rich because compared to other people he would consider himself well off, but this is his new life, this is what he is going to do going forward."



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