

UK Independence Party on brink of collapse

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The UK Independence Party (UKIP) is in a meltdown after its leader Henry Bolton refused to stand down. On Sunday, UKIP's National Executive Committee (NEC) unanimously passed a vote of no confidence in Bolton, who has been leader for just four months.

The vote came after it was disclosed that Bolton's 25-year-old glamour model girlfriend Jo Marney had made racist remarks about Prince Harry's fiancée, Meghan Markle. The tweets led to an exposure of various right-wing diatribes by Marney, including over the Grenfell Tower inferno.

The relationship was already under fire after Bolton left his wife and children for Marney, who has been suspended from UKIP membership. By Wednesday, fully 15 senior UKIP figures, including Bolton's deputy and assistant deputy, had quit their posts to force him to stand down. The party has also reportedly stopped paying his salary in a bid to "starve" him out.

Bolton has rejected the NEC vote and insists he will remain in place until an emergency meeting of UKIP members next month. Claiming that he is the victim of an "organised coup and insurgency against my leadership," Bolton attacked the NEC as "not fit for purpose" and vowed to reform it, saying it is "time to drain the swamp."

Bolton, a former Liberal Democrat and ex-captain in the British Army, was elected on just 30 percent of the vote last September. His victory was largely the result of his claim to be the "moderate" and "steady" leader required for a party already in an advanced state of political disintegration.

UKIP reached its high-water mark in the 2015 general election when it won nearly four million votes, 12.6 percent of those cast. Under the former City broker and Member of the European Parliament Nigel Farage, it cast its free market opposition to the European Union (EU) as "anti-establishment," heavily buttressed by anti-immigrant rhetoric.

With UKIP gaining ground, especially amongst the Tory grassroots, then-Prime Minister David Cameron called the 2016 referendum on British membership of the EU. The aim was to finally resolve the bitter faction fight on the right over EU membership with a decisive vote in favour of Remain. Instead, the vote went narrowly in favour of Leave.

Despite UKIP's apparent success with Brexit, the party has been in free-fall ever since. After Farage resigned following the referendum, the party has seen four leaders in 16 months, with Diane James quitting after 18 days and Paul Nuttall standing down after lying on his CV.

Bitter in-fighting has been fuelled by UKIP's collapse at the polls. In 2017, it recorded just 1.8 percent of the vote and lost all but one of the 145 English council seats it was defending. Its sole Westminster MP, Conservative renegade Douglas Carswell, also quit. Party membership has halved from 47,000 in 2015—the highest recorded—to less than 25,000 now, and is losing members at the rate of 1,000 each month.

Bolton's leadership was always tenuous. His victory was possible only because he was regarded by some as the best means of stopping the most popular grassroots candidate, Anne Marie Waters.

Waters, a former Labour Party member, made several attempts to stand for the Labour Party before she quit to join UKIP in 2015. A leading figure in the anti-Muslim Pegida UK, alongside former English Defence League activist Tommy Robinson, and the director of Sharia Watch UK, she was allied with UKIP's far-right, including former members of the British National Party. Waters came second to Bolton in September's contest, with 21.3 percent of the vote, and split off with supporters to found For Britain.

Publicly, Farage has backed Bolton's efforts to impose a new constitution on UKIP and bypass the

NEC, saying it is the only way to establish if “UKIP is fit for purpose.”

“It’s very difficult to start new political parties in Britain and UKIP has an established brand,” he said, but cast doubt on Bolton’s ability to carry through the necessary reforms.

Notwithstanding concerns for the “brand,” the *Sunday Times* reported that Farage has been in talks with multi-millionaire Arron Banks, who formerly bankrolled UKIP and the Leave.EU campaign group, over the formation of a new movement. The *Times* said that Farage is being lined up as president, Banks as chairman and “Richard Tice, a property developer and co-chairman of the Leave Means Leave campaign group, is also expected to be offered a role.”

“The plan is that the movement will eventually morph into a new party with candidates, who have been properly vetted, able to contest seats at the next general election and really hold Theresa May’s feet to the fire on Brexit,” the newspaper reported, citing a “source close to Banks.”

Banks and Farage were said to have considered launching the “movement” last September in the eventuality that Waters won the leadership of UKIP. The basis of their opposition to her is unclear. Certainly no issues of political principles are involved: While Farage was denouncing Waters in the UK, he was addressing a rally of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Berlin, alongside its deputy leader Beatrix von Storch, the granddaughter of Hitler’s finance minister, Lutz von Krosigk.

Discussions on the formation of a new pro-Brexit “movement” are a response to the deepening crisis of British capitalism. Prime Minister Theresa May heads a minority government, led by a party that is even more bitterly divided over Brexit than before the referendum. In addition to the opposition of a substantial section of the ruling elite to her declared “hard Brexit” rhetoric, she faces significant and growing social opposition to her agenda of austerity and militarism.

Achieving a “real Brexit” has become the by-word amongst the Alt-Right for the launch of an explicitly nationalist, anti-immigrant party based on the charge that May is “betraying” Brexit, or is at least too weak to see it through.

Earlier this month, Farage and Banks said they were minded to back a second referendum to settle the issue

for once and for all. Farage demanded, and got, a meeting with Michael Barnier, the EU’s Brexit negotiator, in which he positioned himself as the representative of the “17.5 million” people who voted for Brexit.

Raheem Kassam, Farage’s former aide and editor-in-chief at *Breitbart News* London, has opposed a second referendum but is said to be considering the launch of a new party, should UKIP fail to get itself in order.

Most notable is the support of former Labour MP and anti-war activist George Galloway for this project. Writing on Banks’ *Westmonster* web site, Galloway opined that “Brexit won’t happen unless someone holds the government’s feet to the fire.”

During the 2016 referendum, Galloway notoriously lined up alongside Farage and representatives of the arch-Thatcherite wing of the Tory Party at their launch of the *Grassroots Out* campaign, issuing the call: “Left, right, left, right, forward march together.”

In his blog, “UKIP is dead Long Live the NEWKIP,” Galloway praises Farage and UKIP as a “patriotic front of left, right and centre.” Now what is needed, he says, is an “economically radical” party, able to tap into “the winter of discontent over the way our country is run.” It should eschew the “culture wars of identity politics” and fight for a “real Brexit” against the Tories, who had thrown away their “parliamentary majority in an unnecessary general election.”

Significantly, Galloway holds out the possibility that such a movement could work in solidarity with Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party. He claims it would enable Corbyn to resist the “enormous pressure” of the pro-Remain Blairites seeking to shape Labour as a means of stopping Brexit. He welcomes in this regard Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell’s acknowledgement that “free movement” had “driven wages down,” a statement that he complains had earned himself “all kinds of foul names over the last years.”



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