



By: **Harvey Morris**

Unforced election gambit is no laughing matter for UK's Farage



It was a week of drama in British politics that ranged from the comic to the tragic as Reform Party leader Nigel Farage sought to salvage his leadership of the populist right.

Central to the plot was **Farage's decision to resign** from parliament in order to stand for re-election in the seaside constituency he already represents.

It was seen as either a bold or a brazen move to shut down, for the time being at least, an official probe into allegedly undeclared funding he received from a crypto billionaire and a convicted fraudster.

The main rival parties said they would boycott the vote, dismissing Farage's gambit as a stunt. So, by the week's end, the only serious candidate prepared to confront him was a self-styled intergalactic space warrior who sports a waste bin on his head.

Count Biface, for it is he, became an overnight sensation among a public seeking some comic relief from the latest heatwave and the fever of the World Cup.

That mood was broken by the shocking news that former Conservative MP turned Reform spokeswoman **Ann Widdecombe** had been found murdered at her isolated rural home.

A 28-year-old man was arrested on suspicion of murder and, subsequently, of suspected terrorist acts as the case switched from local police to anti-terrorism officers.

How the elements of the tragicomedy play out in terms of public perceptions will have an impact on Reform and Farage's leadership as the party aspires to confront Labour at the next general election.

A win or a lose for the former Mr Brexit?

His polling figures have been softening of late amid revelations about his doubtful donations, as Labour benefits from the prospect of a new

leader to replace an unpopular Keir Starmer.

There has been growing speculation, naturally promoted by his political rivals, that the country has reached "peak Farage".

He has, meanwhile, grown increasingly testy in the face of media probing, revealing an unsmiling harshness beneath the hail-fellow-well-met exterior. The English expression has always contained an element of insincerity as well as affability.

So are recent events a win or a lose for the former Mr Brexit?

If he wants to spend the summer arguing with a bin, I won't stop him" - Chancellor Rachel Reeves

The Count Biface carnival clearly failed to amuse him, but then all politicians fear the power of ridicule.

Farage's political opponents joined in the joke. **Chancellor Rachel Reeves**, whose role includes granting permission for MPs to step down, announced: "If he wants to spend the summer arguing with a bin, I won't stop him."

The Reform leader's supporters and po-faced partisans in the press were left harrumphing that the main parties' boycott of the by-election due next month was an assault on democracy and an insult to the hard-working people of his Clacton constituency.

Some suggested darkly that Biface himself was part of a plot by the very "establishment" that Farage has pledged to confront.

A touch of gaiety to dreary election night results

The bin-faced Count, also known as comedy screenwriter Jon Harvey, is from a tradition of British anarcho-humorists who have fought a multitude of elections they know they will never win. Whether dressed in dustbin hats or

fox masks, they add a touch of gaiety to dreary election night results.

Binface/Harvey has indeed been associated with progressive causes in the past, while his top pledge this time around is to cap the price of a popular northern delicacy, the Wigan kebab.

Not funny, say the Reformists, dismissing an **Ipsos poll** showing Binface would enjoy a 12-point lead over Farage among the wider electorate if they could vote in Clacton.

That may have been a tongue-in-cheek answer from the poll respondents. More significant for Farage were the three-quarters who believed he should continue to be investigated for breaking rules on political donations even if, as expected, he wins his Clacton by-election.

Farage insists Clacton voters will be the judges of the funding allegations against him, which he denies

The neglected Essex resort and its rundown outskirts offered Farage his entry into the House of Commons in 2024 on his eighth attempt.

Since then, he has been chided, including by locals, for rarely visiting the constituency and spending more time with crypto pals and American backers than with the left-behind voters of the Essex riviera.

Along with the fitful start for some of the Reform councils that emerged from recent local elections, Farage's absences have added to the perception that his party is better at campaigning than delivering.

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A drift from Reform

Assuming he survives a Binface challenge, what impact might Widdecombe's untimely death have on Reform's fortunes?

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He has been partially vindicated by the subsequent intervention of the anti-terror police, although questions surrounding the suspect and his potential motives remain to be answered.

Farage had previously raised concerns about the security of Reform MPs and prominent party figures.

Following Widdecombe's death, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood responded by offering the Reform leader a meeting with security officials while insisting MPs of all parties were already treated equally when it came to their safety.

The current political tragicomedy will soon be eclipsed by the ascent of **Andy Burnham** as prime minister and leader of the Labour Party. Will he be the one to stem the Reform tide, a tide that may already be turning?

The 'Burnham bounce' has put the two parties neck-and-neck in recent polls, with Labour topping Reform in one survey.

A drift from Reform might soon be confirmed by the put-upon voters of Clacton as they face the choice between the self-appointed enemy

of the establishment and a bin-faced warrior
from outer space.