

## Farage is facing his own menace on the right

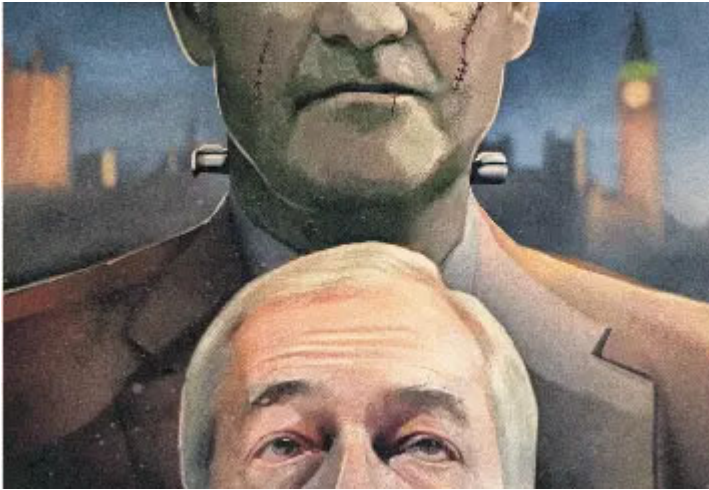
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If you don't spend your days on the site we once knew as Twitter, it is entirely possible that you have never heard of Rupert Lowe or his embryonic party Restore Britain. If, however, you linger on X you cannot avoid him, not least because he enjoys the support and algorithmic patronage of Elon Musk.



Lowe, a wealthy businessman, was one of Nigel Farage's new Reform UK MPs until he was thrown out, possibly because he, rather than his leader, was enjoying the Muskal benediction. At first he seemed just another in a long line of rivals turned into roadkill on the Farage freeway. But unlike others he has the wherewithal and online support — at least as important as X are his 1.2mn Facebook followers — to fight back.

And the fight is personal for him. He depicts Reform's leader as a weak compromiser. Where Farage tiptoed towards his party's policy on deportations, Lowe talks cheerfully about removing "millions" of people.

Now, Restore is showing signs of breaking out from its digital realm and Lowe's Norfolk stronghold. It is garnering enough interest to threaten Reform's chances against Labour's Andy Burnham in June's Makerfield by-election. Focus groups and anecdotal evidence suggest a surprising degree of support.

After decades of menacing the Tories from the right, Farage is facing his own threat from the fringe. And Lowe is using Farage's attention-seeking playbook to build traction. It would be funny if it weren't so troubling.

It is still early days, not least in Makerfield. But Farage and his allies are visibly rattled, especially by the support from Musk. If Lowe keeps them scared it could have wider consequences, not least by forcing Farage into a strategic choice he has worked hard to avoid.

Restore's pitch is a more hardline offering, one even more hostile to immigrants in both rhetoric and detail. It draws enthusiasm from openly racist and antisemitic white nationalist groups — the kind who once flocked to the farright British National Party.

The more of a threat it appears, the greater the pressure on Farage to match its approach to shore up his base. And Reform's policies, toughened in the past year, are already pretty hardline. It proposes deporting not just criminals or illegal entrants but also legal migrants yet to secure citizenship, who claim benefits or fail to meet income thresholds.

But Farage has managed to tread a line, policing his boundaries by refusing to work with far-right figures such as Tommy Robinson. He has Muslims in prominent party roles though Reform evinces strong anti-Islamic prejudice.

Farage argues that he is the safety valve that destroyed Britain's far right. But he also knew their supporters would probably vote for him anyway. Reform is not doing so well that it can afford to lose too many of them if they find a purer alternative home.

Lowe's threat is akin to that posed by Éric Zemmour to Marine Le Pen in France, though with a less forgiving electoral system. Farage does not fear being superseded but in a world of multi-party politics even a small split could cost him seats. In 2010 the BNP secured at least 5 per cent in 71 constituencies. If Lowe equalled that he could deny Farage many target seats. So what to do?

For all its current ascendancy and electoral success, Reform appears stuck in the mid-to-high twenties in the polls. Recent elections have also shown voters rallying round other parties to defeat Farage. The next election may come down to whether the key issue for voters is ousting Labour or blocking him.

For now Farage can dismiss Restore as a vote-splitting one-man band. But if it gains ground he must decide whether to move right to counter it. Immigration is his cornerstone issue. He dare not cede it to a rival. And Farage's instincts default towards more hardline positions when he is worried.

Until now Farage has pursued a wider strategy of combining revolution with reassurance, convincing voters not to fear him. He wants to be seen as both a better Conservative Party and a radical new force tearing down the old system.

With no serious threat to his right, Farage has focused on reassurance, talking of Reform as a "centre-right" party. He has promoted high-profile Tory defectors despite the unease of older members. Chasing Lowe risks alienating moderate waverers. So far Farage has avoided choosing between Reform's two faces. Restore could threaten that.

A confident Farage would hang tough and bet on squeezing Lowe at a general election. He could treat it as an opportunity, using Restore as a decontamination chamber to make his own party look less extreme, proof that he remains within the, admittedly shifting,

boundaries of political decency. Even defeat in Makerfield can be used as a warning against splitting the right vote. But he would have to hold his nerve.

Opponents of Farage will welcome the prospect of his vote fracturing, of the revolutionary right eating itself. Lowe could be the best thing to happen to Labour since universal suffrage. But it comes with a cost. The boundaries of debate have already changed sharply. Anti-immigrant, particularly anti-Muslim, sentiment is open and normalised. Reform and the Tories have already moved significantly, both adopting deportation strategies. A buoyant Reston could shift them further.

Much will depend on how frightened Farage feels. But the last thing a polarised nation needs is a new bidding war on the anti-immigrant right.