



Grassroots anger tests Farage’s grip on Reform UK

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[Grassroots anger tests Farage’s grip on Reform UK](#)

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Reform UK leader Nigel Farage put on a brave face this week, as he sought to put a blazing row with one of the party's now suspended MPs behind him.

The party is still neck-and-neck with Labour in the polls, and on Monday, [it showed off 29 councillors](#) who had recently defected to Reform UK.

While Farage acknowledged there had been “a little bit of turbulence”, he stressed the upset was “very much at the edges”.

But does the disquiet within the party go deeper than he suggested?

Divisions have become more acute in a party that now boasts more than 200,000 members and 400 local branches across the country.

Much of the anger is directed at Farage and Reform's chairman, Zia Yusuf, over their efforts to professionalise the party.

The party is being more ruthless in its vetting of candidates. It's also investigating – and in some cases expelling – members because of their activity on social media.

Farage is said to be desperate to avoid another election campaign where he faces constant questioning about the controversial comments of his candidates.

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But as the party gears up for local elections in May, it faces a huge challenge to control unruly elements in its grassroots membership who resent the way they are being treated by the leadership.

The BBC has learned at least 12 interim chairs of local Reform UK branches have resigned over the conduct of the party's leadership in recent months.

A Reform UK spokesman said the resignations amounted to 2% of its branch chairs.

“Our understanding is that the other parties have much higher churn than that,” the spokesman said.

“We are sorry that we have lost 2% of our branch chairs, some of whom failed vetting. But we're the only major party that does this sort of vetting.”

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One of the chairs was Maria Bowtell, a councillor on East Riding of Yorkshire Council who gave a speech at Reform UK's party conference last year.

In her resignation letter, she said she felt “abandoned” in her role, described the party’s candidate selection as “chaotic”, and accused the leadership of lacking integrity.

Other members have quit on free-speech grounds, including Howard Cox, who stood as a Reform UK candidate in the general election and the London mayoral poll.

He said he left the party after he was threatened with expulsion for criticising the treatment of Tommy Robinson, a prominent far-right activist.

Cox told the BBC “my inboxes are now flooded with grassroots Reformers who are incredibly upset and feel that their political optimism for our country has been betrayed”.

“Over a dozen Reform branches have contacted me, stating that they have been replaced, overridden, and disrespected by Zia Yusuf’s headquarters team,” he added.

Other branch chairs resigned over policy differences, particularly the issue of “mass deportations”, which Farage has called a “political impossibility”.

Jack Davison, the former chair of the Dover and Deal branch, said in attempting to professionalise, the party was adopting the “very traits of the establishment it sought to challenge”.

“This culture of ‘silencing’ was deeply troubling,” he said.

Another former branch chair in Newcastle, Dan Astley, said the party had not been “properly democratised”.

He said the Reform UK’s constitution, which was adopted last year, allowed the party’s board to have the final say on sacking and appointing a new leader.

Rupert Lowe row

But for many already disgruntled members, the allegations against Rupert Lowe have infuriated and disillusioned them the most.

The MP was been suspended by Reform UK over accusations of bullying in his office, and a police investigation into alleged threats against the party’s chairman, Yusuf.

Lowe has denied any wrongdoing and his supporters have rallied around him, accusing the leadership of trying to force him out for daring to challenge Farage.

The row came as no surprise to Ben Habib, a former Reform UK deputy leader who quit the party citing “fundamental differences” with Farage.

He told the BBC that Farage’s idea of professionalisation “would appear to be the wilful destruction of the grassroots movement”.

“The playbook used against Rupert Lowe has been used across the grassroots,” he said.

‘Teething issues’

The BBC put some of these criticisms to the party’s chairman, Yusuf.

He said Reform UK under Farage had delivered “the greatest political acceleration in British history”, with “a fraction of the resources of the two old parties”.

Yusuf, who was appointed chairman after the general election last year, said the party had vetted thousands of people and “the majority have passed”.

But some don’t, he said, adding that “just comes with the territory of being a professional party”.

Reform UK’s vetting system, Yusuf said, was “meaningfully more rigorous than anything that the other parties do”.

“Of course, anything growing at this scale, there’ll be some teething issues,” he added.

The recent ructions do appear to have cut through to the voting public though.

[One recent survey suggested, external](#) that the party was split with a third of Reform voters believing the party would be faring better under a different leader, but the same amount believing that the party would be doing worse.

The survey also suggested that Farage’s net favourability with Reform voters had fallen since the Lowe row.

Yet the latest YouGov poll put Reform UK on 23% of the vote, behind Labour on 24% but ahead of the Conservatives on 22%.

Gawain Towler still believes in Farage’s leadership, despite being sacked as Reform UK’s head of press last year.

Towler said he had been to several branch meetings as a speaker recently and had witnessed very little dissent.

He said Reform UK won 4.1 million votes at last year’s general election “with a ramshackle operation and an army of volunteers who worked their socks off for no recompense whatsoever”.

“We need to get at least 10 million to win,” Towler said. “You’re not going to find six million votes to our right. You’d be mad to appease some screamy people on the outside of the party.”

For now, the party’s focus is trained on the upcoming local elections. It has high hopes in Lincolnshire where its candidate Andrea Jenkyns, a former Tory MP, is vying to be mayor.

Reform UK sources say internal private polling has left them optimistic about winning what would be its highest elected office to date.

But to become a serious contender to win a general election, Reform UK may have to get a firmer grip on its grassroots.

It may also have to convince members to back some of the messy compromises that other mainstream parties make to attract more voters.

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