

23 April 2016, The Times, Matthew Parris

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4737673.ece>

## **New-look Ukip threatens Cameron's legacy; By rebranding itself as a movement, not a party, Ukip would become a virus that could destroy moderate Conservatism**

Matthew Parris

'I've got a weird feeling,' Arron Banks told The Times's Lucy Fisher before the EU referendum campaign began, 'that British politics will be realigned after the referendum.'

The Farage-funding tycoon's thoughts are worth noting. A sort of Holy Fool of the Ukip establishment, Mr Banks seems careless whether what he says hurts or helps in the daily grind, yet his reasoning often cuts through the froth. You can, for instance, imagine Leave spin doctors wincing this week at Banks's remark that George Osborne's "£4,300 per household" cost of Brexit would be a "bargain basement" price for regaining our sovereignty - yet there was a deep truth in it. Unless the Leave campaign are able to summon up a St Crispin's day vision of a prize beyond monetary calculation, they are doomed. They are about nationhood or they are nothing.

So when Mr Banks said he thought the referendum would shake up our party politics so violently that the pieces would never fit back together into the old shapes, I believe he was on to a story for the 21st-century history books.

Emerging among the senior ranks of the UK Independence Party is an as yet half-formed idea. "We're kicking this around," someone from these ranks told me yesterday, and the hint was clear: the exercise is serious, and should be watched nervously by Tories who hanker for a return to the old party monoliths.

The idea is that after the referendum, win or lose, Ukip should seize its moment in the fissile and angry mood that will then prevail; dissolve; and re-form as a new political brand, probably under a new name: a sort of cyber-party, cheap and easy to join, with much of its activity and most of its outreach online.

The advantages are obvious and so are the drawbacks. My informant would not have put it like this but, online, you can do superbly what populist parties do best anyway: be all things to all men. In a real-time town-hall meeting you will always offend some by pleasing others. Online the some and the others don't meet. You can target them with different messages.

And the Ukip brand is looking tired, a bit tawdry. Its populism needs refreshing, though here I part company with those in the party canvassing this relaunch: I believe Nigel Farage has become part of the problem, and cannot be part of its solution. Incapable of attracting without repelling, he's an energiser who polarises. And Mr Farage is sounding shop-worn; his on-off resignation after the last general election was a massive failure of judgment. He should now become the Alex Salmond of the populist right: they need a Nicola Sturgeon.

But the biggest drawback to what we might call @nukip is that their core demographic includes the people in Britain least likely to find their political bearings in cyber-space. The elderly, the unemployed, the low-waged, the under-educated and the generally discontented are also the least computer-literate among our population. It is true that the populist right, if it is to move out of second gear, needs to reach beyond this core, but its core are identifiable, reliable and loyal; and they supply a kind of passion. There's a point to comfort zones: they lend comfort.

Ukip's blue-sky thinkers covet the huge penumbra of soft support that the Corbynite wing of the Labour party finds among its £3 non-member "supporters" club. My guess is that fishing in cyber waters, you net an (on average) younger, cooler and more generally switched-on crowd. Corbynite Labour has done so, but is there the same untapped support for the populist right out there on the internet, for @nukip to tap?

And can you really keep the people who live in retirement bungalows while rebranding yourself for the cyber market? I once enraged many in Ukip with a rude pen-portrait of Clacton-on-Sea. Taking places as metaphors, I said that by wooing Clacton the Conservative party risked losing Canary Wharf. I hold to that, and the converse also applies. By wooing Canary Wharf, @nukip would risk losing Clacton.

It would be tricky, though perhaps it can be done. But the Banks plan, though potentially transfigurative for the populist right, risks looking like a cynical rebranding exercise that ends up with the same old crew, some new slogans and a revamped website. Something more is needed: a real rocket boost. But how?

Here's how. Ukip is brutally handicapped by our first-past-the-post voting system: millions of votes at the last election translated into not a single gain. So what if they ceased bashing their heads against that brick wall, and stopped being a political party at all, by ceasing to field candidates?

Already (I hear) they are considering calling themselves a "movement", so what about taking that literally? @nukip could then seek subscribers from within the Conservative and indeed Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, as the National Trust, the Friends of Israel or the League Against Cruel Sports do: both among grassroots activists and in parliament too. Those many thousands of local Tory members who defected to Ukip (sometimes to sighs of relief from their Tory MP) could return to plague constituency Conservative associations and strongarm candidate selections.

This could be huge. It could begin the crystallisation of something already lurking within Conservatism: a party within a party. If @nukip were not challenging Tory candidates in elections but were simply a philosophical movement that anyone was free to join, and if they trod carefully and gave the Tory hierarchy no excuse to proscribe them as an organisation, I don't see how the virus could be combated.

The plan is not without weaknesses. Looking like a special breed of Conservatism would stunt @nukip's appeal to Labour or Lib Dem voters - a loss because there must be a good shortterm potential yield of disaffected voters to be found among blue-collar Labour and nowhere-to-go Lib Dems. Jeremy Corbyn and Tim Farron have plenty yet to shed.

But feeding off corpses is not a longterm strategy. The most vigorous and successful Britain-wide party today is the Conservative party, but it is haunted by a philosophical divide between progressives and reactionaries. Our EU referendum is laying this bare in a stinging,

stunning manner. July would be the moment for the populist right to strike, and start wrenching the Tories even wider open. This might even coincide with a public split within Labour. The result could be a flow of refugee "moderates" from both sides towards the political centre.

So I'll end by repeating what Mr Banks said: "I've got a weird feeling that British politics will be realigned after the referendum." So have I.