



Tim Bale

Joanna Bale

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A Reform UK government isn't inevitable

*Reform UK is continuously leading in polls, and given the unpopularity of Labour and the Conservative parties, many are beginning to see a Nigel Farage government as inevitable. **Joanna Bale** interviews **Tim Bale** about the prospect of Reform UK ending up in power, the obstacles along the way and the way the far right has reshaped British Politics.*

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With Reform's recent success in local elections and a parliamentary by-election, do you think we're witnessing a temporary populist surge or the beginning of a longer-term realignment in British politics?

I'm rather cautious about the idea of a realignment or, "The realignment," as people used to say after the 2019 election, because I think, often, election results can be rather more contingent than people imagine. So, for example, there was a lot said about Boris Johnson creating this new, impregnable voter coalition in 2019. And come 2024, the Conservatives crashed to their worst defeat ever.

Having said that, obviously I think it's been true for some time that voters have been falling out of love with the two main parties and looking for an alternative, and not finding it in the traditional third party, the Liberal Democrats. And generally speaking, not finding it in the Greens either, although in Scotland, finding it in the SNP. So there is room in the system for an anti-establishment party, just as there is in many European countries. I think we are seeing a big shift, but I wouldn't want to say that that makes a Reform UK government under Nigel Farage as prime minister inevitable in the way that, perhaps, some people are saying because they would very much like it to happen.

Do you think a Reform government is a distinct possibility though?

I think given how volatile British politics has been over the last few years, and given how unanchored most people are from one party or another, given that we have a very unstable

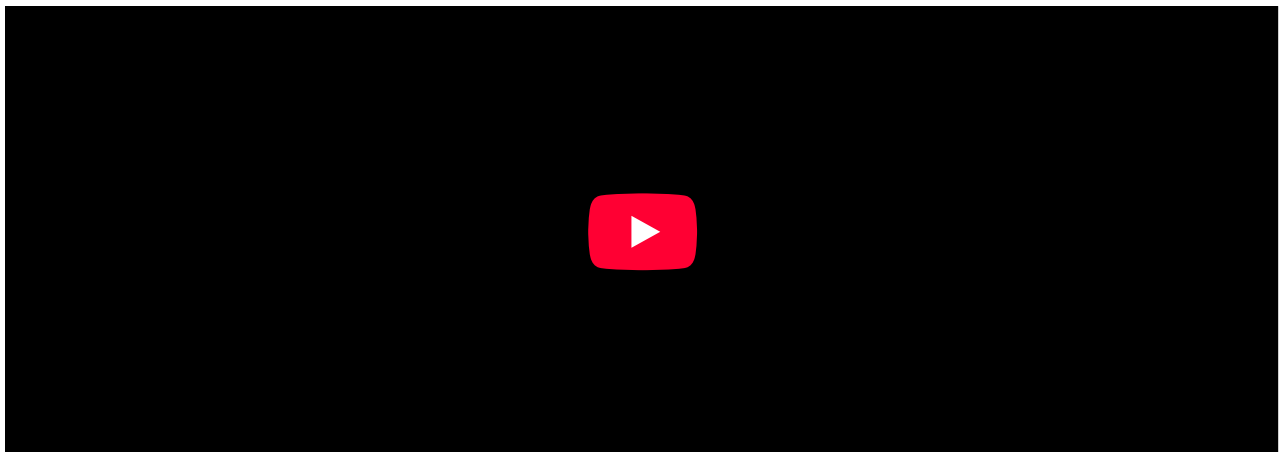
geopolitical situation, given that it's going to be very difficult to "stop the boats", given that there will be arguments, because of the cost of living, about moves to a green transition, and given there are so many older people who feel uncomfortable with the kind of cultural changes we've seen, yeah, "never say never".



Many people look at how the Conservative Party's run things for the last 14 years, how the Labour Party has run things for the last year, and think, "Really, could Reform do any worse?"



I think one problem for Reform, funnily enough though, is Nigel Farage, in the sense that he's both their biggest asset and their biggest liability. He is, to use that cliché, quite a marmite politician. So there are a whole bunch of people who absolutely love him, but there are a lot of people who absolutely despise the man and wouldn't trust him an inch, let alone to run the government.



And I think that's probably what Labour, and to some extent the Conservatives, are relying on. By '28, '29, people will be faced not with telling opinion pollsters which party they prefer, but actually with a choice between a bunch of people who at least have run governments before, and even if they haven't done it brilliantly, probably know what they're doing, and a guy who so far has only got four parliamentary colleagues, none of whom have ever had any kind of executive experience in government. And when it comes to that crunch, I'm not sure people will necessarily vote for the more radical option. But who knows?

If Reform did get into government, what do you think would happen? What does that mean for the future?

I think if **Reform UK** do get into government, all bets are off. You will have a party that has no experience of running the country, which has a parliamentary contingent with no experience of what it means to be a legislator. I would've thought it will be a recipe for chaos. But many people look at how the Conservative Party's run things for the last 14 years, how the Labour Party has run things for the last year, and think, "Really, could they do any worse?" I would guess actually they could do a lot worse, but some people are prepared to take that chance.

What would it take to reverse or at least blunt the influence of Reform in the UK? Is it a question of policy, leadership or social change?

I think to blunt Reform UK's performance in the short to medium term, we are probably talking about Nigel Farage falling under the proverbial bus. It's difficult to see how they could replace him, and I think that would make a big difference. Otherwise, I think all the Government can do is focus on trying to make a tangible improvement to people's standard of living and to public services, and hope that that is enough, in the end, to persuade people not to take a chance on something more radical.

If there's one thing you wish the public better understood about the rise of the radical right in Britain, what would it be?

I think the one take-home message would be that there is a symbiotic relationship between the Conservative Party on the one hand, and Nigel Farage's vehicles on the other. And that you can't really understand the rise of UKIP, you can't really understand the rise of the Brexit Party and Reform UK, without understanding the Conservative Party and vice versa. You can't really understand **what's happened to the Conservative Party** without understanding Nigel Farage and the appeal of populism.

Do you think the radical right is shaping our future or the future of politics?

I think certainly it's going to play a big part in British politics over the next few years, and I would argue that it's actually been playing a big part really since 2010. This is only the latest development, the culmination as some would see it, of a long-term trend.

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About the author

Tim Bale is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary University and is the author, together with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, of *Riding the Populist Wave* and, most recently, *The Conservative Party after Brexit*.

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