

Nigel Farage: Lucky Guy?

Below we are publishing a report by one of our affiliate organisations, Brexit-Watch. This is a review of a book by Michael Crick on 'Mr Brexit', Nigel Farage. The review is by former MEP Jonathan Bullock and his article is an entertaining and informative read.

We are grateful to our friends at Brexit-Watch for permission to re-publish their work.

One party after another; the disruptive life of Nigel Farage – by Michael Crick

*Simon & Schuster 2022, 608 pages Paperback
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"I FOUND myself under a genius and would go on to win twice in Europe". These were actually the words of John McGovern, the former Nottingham Forest FC captain who, under maverick Brian Clough, went on to win the European Cup twice – but they could easily apply to me.

The similarities between Cloughie and Nigel Farage aren't obvious, but are there. They were both underdogs, could handle the media, took on the establishment, won twice in Europe and were denied the recognition they deserved. They both also loved cricket, appealed to the man in the street and liked a drink.

Michael Crick has written a workmanlike biography of Farage, interviewing hundreds of people and investigating some of the key incidents in Farage's life. It is detailed, impartial and, on disputed points, gives both sides of the argument to let the reader decide. As is clear from the book, while many people have remained firm friends and supporters of Farage, there are also people who have fallen out with him over the decades and, in some cases, it is also clear that maybe facts and feelings have become mixed or there is an axe to grind.

Crick doesn't quite remember when he first met Nigel. I met him in February 1998 at Enoch Powell's funeral in Westminster. I had met up with Marc-Henri Glendenning, the former Chairman of the Federation of Conservative Students and a keen Eurosceptic activist, to watch from outside the church. Marc brought along Nigel Farage, a city metals broker who had joined a still relatively new UKIP but was not yet an MEP. After Nigel left, and still believing in the Conservative Party, I remember saying 'bright guy, but what's he doing with UKIP – and he's whizzed off – don't suppose we will see much of him in the future'. How wrong I was!

Crick's biography begins fairly traditionally with Farage's childhood, which can't have always been easy. He was the son of stockbroker, Guy Farage, who left his family and lost his job after becoming an alcoholic, but later quit the booze, turned his life around, remarried and was readmitted to the stock exchange, becoming something of a hero to the young Nigel. We also learn that Nigel's grandfather fought in WWI and was wounded at Vimy Ridge, which may well account for Nigel's interest in WWI battle sites which has developed over the years into an acknowledged expertise.

Crick also describes how Nigel was, like many energetic teenagers, at times a rebellious youngster at school. In his case, Dulwich College – a private school in South London. Interestingly, he was a day boy in a school where half the pupils received grants, so were from very diverse backgrounds.

This perhaps in part explains Nigel's ability to talk to and get on with people from all backgrounds – whether in the City or in a northern working man's club.

Skipping university, Nigel went straight into work at 18 as a metals broker in the City, eventually setting up his own business after blotting his copybook when he and a client arrived on the trading floor obviously a bit worse for wear. People who dealt with Nigel described how scrupulously honest he was. Crick quotes a contemporary who described Nigel's business as '100% on the right side of what you should be doing – accounts were correct and taxes paid'. He was a 'superb client's man' ticking over but not making a fortune.

It is clear that two near death incidents caused Nigel to think of things beyond his City career – a brush with curable testicular cancer and a bad car crash – propelling him eventually into politics. Nigel's interest in politics really took off after John Major signed the infamous Maastricht treaty. It was, however, not with the Tories that Nigel became actively involved (though previously a member), but the new Anti-Federalist League set up by Alan Sked. This was the party which later changed its name to UKIP.

Crick describes, in amazing detail, the various internecine fighting as Farage, always the kingmaker but not yet the king, became more involved in the fledgling UKIP. He stood in by-elections and general elections and increasingly played a central role in the various party shenanigans (the facts of which are often disputed), including changing locks on office doors (to keep out certain people), as the bitter feuds developed. It is fascinating stuff, but reminiscent of student politics which, as Henry Kissinger said, "is so vicious because the stakes are so small'.

One interesting fallacy which Crick debunks is the incident when Nigel was photographed outside a pub next to a BNP extremist. It turns out Farage was deliberately set up by Nick

Griffin who, realising he was a rising star, colluded with a UKIP defector who arranged to meet Nigel for a pub lunch with a promise to reveal information about Sked (with whom Nigel had fallen out). When Nigel and the defector left the pub, the BNP extremist arrived and the scene was set for the contrived photo opportunity.

Crick refers to two important events significant in the progress of both Farage and UKIP. One was the winding up of the Eurosceptic Referendum Party shortly after the 1997 general election, upon the death of its founder, Sir Jimmy Goldsmith. The Referendum Party had significantly outperformed UKIP – but its winding up drove hundreds of supporters and trained candidates into UKIP. The second was the introduction by the Labour Government of proportional representation for the European Elections. Without the latter UKIP would simply not have established that bridgehead of three MEPs, who included Farage, in 1999.

Crick quotes Farage's well known response to being elected when questioned on whether he would be corrupted by the European lifestyle of champagne and dinners – "No, I've always lived like that!"

Progress, however, was slow as it is hard for a new outfit to break into the cartel of the established parties, and there was no similar electoral success at Westminster level. However, just as everyone thought that peak UKIP had been achieved, Farage recruited Robert Kilroy-Silk, who Crick describes as 'the Piers Morgan of his day', to be a candidate for the 2004 European elections. This gave UKIP added publicity and helped boost the party to 16.1% of the vote and 12 MEPs. Kilroy-Silk stood in the East Midlands where UKIP achieved 26.1% of the vote, just behind the Tories, who probably managed to hold on due to arch Eurosceptic Roger Helmer and Chris Heaton-Harris heading up the list for the Tories.

Coincidentally I was on the same Tory list, but further down and not elected. I took the opportunity to talk to Kilroy-Silk at the count. While polite and friendly enough, he was clearly not a team player. I could see that UKIP had trouble ahead and, sure enough, his disruptive presence manifested itself in an early bid for the leadership of UKIP. This soon came to nothing and he left, setting up his own party, which likewise soon disappeared.

Farage became leader of UKIP and, shortly afterwards, his attack on Herman Von Rompuy, the new President of the European Council (an anointed unknown), propelled Nigel into the wider public consciousness: “you have the charisma of a damp rag and the appearance of a low-grade bank clerk” he said, in a speech which went viral.

Farage fought Buckingham in the 2010 election against the then speaker, John Bercow. This was a canny move evidencing Nigel’s political astuteness, not only because the Tories and Labour traditionally don’t oppose the speaker at elections, but also for the profile and publicity value it gave to UKIP.

While Bercow had started to embarrass the dignity of the role of Speaker, he was still at the time fairly popular within his constituency and I suspect that, while one always hopes to overturn a frontrunner, Nigel probably had more hope than a real expectation of success. Interestingly, Crick points out that Farage used the slogan “take back control” at this election. Farage was to repeat the same slogan in his debates in 2014 against Clegg, which is where Dominic Cummings may have borrowed it from for use in the eventual Vote Leave referendum campaign.

It is, however, the terrible plane crash on polling day for which that election is so memorable. It caused Farage injuries which still affect him today. The pictures of that crash are truly shocking and how Nigel literally walked away from it is little short of amazing – a very lucky guy! Crick thinks this

third brush with death made Farage all the more determined to achieve his aims. Colleagues talk of him being a changed person after this – less partying and more disciplined.

It was also after this that UKIP finally took off. A major factor was the Lib Dems entering Government after Cameron failed to get a majority. UKIP took over the protest vote, particularly when Cameron appeared to be moving the Tories leftwards. The defection of Roger Helmer MEP to UKIP was also significant and brought an influx throughout 2012 of disillusioned Tory activists and Councillors including myself. Finally we all had somewhere to go. For me, growing increasingly disillusioned with the Tories over the years, once I saw UKIP hitting 10% in the opinion polls, I knew it had wind behind it and could go places, making its presence felt and influencing the direction of politics. I was impressed with how Farage was modernising a previously fairly ramshackle organisation to make it a genuine contender at by-elections such as at Eastleigh, which it nearly won.

Farage picked South Thanet to fight in the 2015 election, which was curious. He had fought it in 2005 and not done as well as UKIP performed in other seats. I am convinced he would have won if he had fought Boston & Skegness (a strongly Eurosceptic constituency), but this was deemed too far away for a party leader and, in retrospect, if he had have won, he would have had to give up his MEP seat and, who knows, could have been out of a job after the 2017 election.

Farage played a huge role in the success of the Leave campaign in the 2016 Brexit Referendum. Crick alludes to the likelihood that the two separate Leave campaigns competing for official designation from the Electoral commission could ironically have been a positive. Farage doing his thing appealing to the northern working class where UKIP was strong whilst the mainstream Vote Leave campaign brought the Tories and business on board. It's certainly plausible, but perhaps downplays Farage's more general appeal.

Farage did try to leave party politics after the Referendum, eventually resigning as UKIP leader. He was still active as an MEP pending the UK's departure, but it was the selling out of the British people and the Referendum result by all three mainstream parties that brought him back into the mainstream political arena.

Farage does learn lessons. As UKIP faltered under new leaders and ultimately imploded under Gerald Batten due to his obsession with Islam and Tommy Robinson, Nigel shaped the Brexit Party in a quite different way. Crick readably describes the trials of setting up this new party. Nigel was happy to share the limelight with other star players – Richard Tice as Chairman, Ann Widdecombe, Claire Fox and Annunziata Rees-Mogg.

After the superb victory in the 2019 European elections, which sealed Theresa May's fate, Farage set up a praetorian guard to look after the phalanx of new Brexit Party MEPs in Brussels. This consisted of trusted MEP colleagues such as Nathan Gill as leader of the delegation, myself as deputy leader and the talented Brian Monteith as Chief Whip. The MEP team worked well together – it was the most diverse team in the whole European Parliament with more minorities per member than any other party, all there on talent and merit.

Farage had in a way created the circumstances for Boris Johnson to become Prime Minister in 2019 even though it was Boris whose success in the general election meant Farage moving on from the Brexit Party to cement a new career as a news commentator, broadcaster and eventually into television to front a popular current affairs programme.

Crick has written a detailed account of Nigel's life and, as is always the case with Crick, there are very few errors. He generally gives both versions when there is a disputed issue, which gives the book objectivity but still makes it very readable. I did spot a claim by Crick that Farage hadn't

spoken to his MEPs before dismissing Boris Johnson's so-called "oven ready" Brexit deal. This is not so – the MEPs were all invited into a group meeting with Farage to discuss it. I attended this meeting myself. The four MEPs who eventually backed the deal and rejoined the Tories were not in Brussels on the day of the meeting, but were invited and could have rung in. I also note Crick thinks the final session of Parliament two days before the UK left on Brexit day was in Strasbourg – it was actually in Brussels.

On Brexit day, at 11pm on the 31 January 2020 the Brexit Party had a terrific drinks night at the Cavalry & Guards Club. As I left in the early hours Nigel was sitting in the foyer with his father, Guy Farage, and introduced me. Guy looked dapper and had a beam in his eye which seemed to say "That's my boy". A lucky guy with a lucky Guy, I thought!

Nigel's father didn't, by the way, retire until he was 75 – which, if Nigel does the same, gives plenty of time for a comeback – and Michael Crick may need to extend this biography!

Jonathan Bullock has been a Conservative local councillor, and an MEP for both UKIP then the Brexit Party.