

HOW SHOULD KEIR STARMER TACKLE THE CONTINUED RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT?

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CONTENT NOTICE: This article contains references to instances of violence, including against children. Reader discretion is advised.

Elon Musk is now inarguably the most powerful unelected figure currently involved in United Kingdom (UK) politics: that a single post on his 'X' platform should unleash a days-long news cycle and become the first big story of the year is both dispiriting and, sadly, unsurprising. Having inserted himself into Donald Trump's presidential campaign and transition thanks to [a major cash injection](#), and secured his place in the administration at the head of a pseudo-department working on government efficiency (in fact an advisory commission named after a [meme](#)), the richest man in the world now has his eyes set on Europe.

Between endorsements of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and other far right forces across the continent, Mr Musk has been spending an unenviable amount of time opining on the [supposed tyranny of Keir Starmer's Labour government](#), on [Starmer's alleged personal complicity in the "rape of Britain"](#), and [calling for King Charles to dissolve Parliament](#) barely six months after Labour won the most decisive majority since 1997.

And, until 13:58 GMT on 5 January 2025, the star to whom Musk had hitched his anti-Starmer wagon was one Nigel Farage, majority shareholder of the Reform UK Party, a private limited company which currently has five sitting Members of Parliament (MPs). Or was it that Farage was hitching his to Musk? Reports of a potential [USD 100 million donation](#) by Musk to Reform, a sum many times greater than general election spending limits, had many observers reeling at the influence this would lend Farage in the context of his [ambition](#) to transform British politics. The words "The Reform Party needs a new leader. Farage doesn't have what it takes", posted to

Musk's 211 million X followers on that fateful day, must have been relieving to those worried by the prospect of a Musk-Farage union mirroring the electoral success of Musk-Trump.

But we should not be relieved. In fact, this falling out may serve Farage's ambition to power much more than one would expect, and reinforces that Labour has a lot to do if they are to succeed in government.

The context

In late July 2024, riots broke out in response to the stabbing of three young girls, Alicia da Silva Aguiar, nine, Elsie Dot Stancombe, seven, and Bebe King, six, at a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport. In the immediate aftermath of this horrific crime, [a false story](#) quickly spread on social media alleging that the suspect arrested by police at the scene had been a Muslim asylum seeker who arrived to the UK by boat in 2023. In fact, the suspect, later charged with three counts of murder, ten counts of attempted murder, and possession of a bladed weapon, was a Cardiff-born British citizen.

But this didn't matter to Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, alias (among others) Tommy Robinson, convicted criminal and co-founder of the English Defence League, a far-right extremist Islamophobic and anti-immigrant organisation. Robinson began posting about the crime to his followers on social media, stoking the flames and calling his followers to action by incorporating the crime into his wider narratives. Starting with a violent attack on a mosque in Southport the day after the stabbing, by 5 August cars and buildings had been set on fire (among which a Rotherham hotel housing asylum seekers), petrol bombs had been thrown

in Belfast, police attacked in Plymouth, and violence had spread to most every major city. Rioters were not only Robinson supporters, but his role in whipping up hatred and resentment is clear. By this time, neither the veracity of claims regarding the civic status of the Southport attacker, nor, it seems, the memory of the victims or grief of their families, seemed to matter that much.

Eventually, arrests were made and the riots died down. But misinformation surrounding the Southport stabbing had already had its impact: the lie that a Muslim asylum seeker had killed these innocent girls folded neatly into existing narratives perpetrated by the far-right about the victimisation of children by men from minority-ethnic backgrounds. The Southport riots are not the first time right-wing groups have weaponised violence against children for their own political motives: possibly the most frequently-cited case in this ongoing weaponisation is that between 1997 and 2013, sexual abuse by grooming gangs in Rotherham had been prevalent, as found by a 2014 [report by Professor Alexis Jay](#). The government of the time subsequently made Jay the chair of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which issued [its report](#) in 2022 including 20 concluding recommendations to protect children.

Within the narratives perpetrated by the British far-right, the fact members of these gangs had belonged to minority-ethnic backgrounds was the headline. The crime was used by far-right groups to stoke fear of a larger threat posed by the Muslim community *writ-large*, the Pakistani community *writ-large*, immigration, whether legal or not, *writ-large*, and so on. This despite a [2019 report](#) into child sexual abuse in England and Wales finding that the majority of perpetrators are a family member, friend, or acquaintance of the survivor, rather than a stranger as was the case with the grooming gangs scandal. The larger scope of child sexual abuse does not matter to those spreading

misleading narratives, though: the important part as far as the British far-right are concerned is that some of these crimes were committed by the 'other'. Likewise, the fact that the Southport stabbing was a very different kind of crime to that committed by the Rotherham grooming gangs does not matter either: the important part is that it could be twisted, with the help of misinformation about the suspect, to fit the narrative of the dangerous 'other'.

This lack of care is personified in Robinson's various run-ins with the law. In 2018 he was [found in contempt of court](#) after breaking reporting restrictions by broadcasting footage of defendants accused of sexual exploitation as part of a grooming gang. In 2024 he was once again [found in contempt and jailed](#) for 18 months after claiming the Syrian victim of a violent attack was himself a "thug", resulting in the teenager and his family receiving death threats. In both of these cases we see the importance of narrative over truth and justice: in the 2018 case, Robinson's reporting risked prejudicing the ongoing criminal proceedings and put the trial in jeopardy; in the 2024 case, his million-strong online followership was used as a cudgel against an innocent teenage Syrian refugee victim of violence. All this misinformation is in service of a dangerous and racist narrative, which has reached new heights thanks to Elon Musk and his USD 44 billion soapbox: *this* is the narrative Musk latched onto.

Racing to be the opposition

The 2024 riots signalled the end of any putative 'honeymoon' period for Labour and marked the start of Musk's obsession with overthrowing Keir Starmer's government. At time of writing, [government approval](#) lies at a paltry 16%, with 63% disapproval, while Starmer's personal approval rating is not much better in Britain than Emmanuel Macron's in France. Yet with the Conservative

party still in disarray following their dismal defeat in July, and new leader Kemi Badenoch struggling to find her footing, there is a vacuum of opposition that several actors are trying to fill, with Musk and his money as power broker still in the offing.

Let us start with the Tories, a party dominated, and then destroyed, by internal divisions on Europe since the Thatcher years, a division which exploded with the Brexit referendum. Brexit may not be the daily discussion topic today that it was between 2016 and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the basic divide remains, albeit in a different form: one wing of the party pushes for continually farther-right approaches while another attempts to re-establish the party as a more one-nation conservative entity on the centre-right. The latter, though, was significantly weakened by Boris Johnson's purges during his time in Downing Street.

As such, the final candidates in the leadership contest that followed Rishi Sunak's post-election loss resignation were both of the farther-right camp. Kemi Badenoch, the eventual victor, Brexiteer and Johnson ally, and Robert Jenrick, who has [called](#) for the UK to leave the European Court of Human Rights and [praised](#) Donald Trump's approach to immigration. In the midst of the Musk-Farage-grooming gangs news cycle, Jenrick waded in with the statement that "not all cultures are created equal", while [Liz Truss became involved](#) when Musk posted in support of her attack on Jess Phillips, Labour MP and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls, wherein the former Prime Minister claimed Phillips "excused masked Islamist thugs [...] Its [sic] clear whose side she is on". Phillips has long been targeted by the British far right, with one UK Independence Party (UKIP) candidate at the 2019 election having been [investigated by police](#) in 2016 regarding threatening social media posts about the MP.

The direction of the Conservative party is clear, which brings us to the party whose messaging the Tory right wing is trying to outflank: Reform UK, the second contender in the opposition vacuum and, thus far, the party closest to Musk and his influence. Their strength here is that it is not possible to outflank Reform to the right: their most prominent MPs (Farage and Lee Anderson) are figures who left the Conservative party because it was not right-wing enough for them. Any attempt to 'out-Reform' Reform can thus only ever be seen as inauthentic, and insofar as perceived authenticity is crucial to the type of right populism Reform peddles, this is the Tories' Achilles heel. Many right-wing conservatives defected to Reform in 2024, resulting in their electoral successes; it is difficult to imagine Reform die-hards voting at the next election for a Conservative party that represents only 'Reform-lite'.

This is the tug-of-war into which Musk has inserted himself. While a user exodus continues from X, Musk remains a newsmaker, and with the platform as his soapbox, any pronouncement he makes can fuel news cycles around the world. He brings with him the prospect not only of funding, as he did to the Trump campaign, but also the vocal and continuing support of one of the most talked-about people in the world (for better or worse).

Farage's calculation

It is this vocal and continuing support for figures Musk sees as allies that caused the 5 January post disavowing Farage. Here we return to Tommy Robinson, of whom Musk has been [increasingly supportive](#), pinning a post containing the slogan "Free Tommy Robinson" to his X profile. Recognising Robinson's toxicity, and as a way of making his own brand seem more moderate by comparison, Farage has always sought to distance himself. He ended his

membership of UKIP in 2018 [citing ties](#) between then-leader Gerard Batten and Robinson as the primary cause, and has [actively stated](#) that he would be unwelcome in the Reform party too. One wonders why former UKIP allies and some [current Reform party members](#) seem so enamoured with Robinson if, as Farage claims, his brand of far-right hatred is so far from the UKIP/Reform project.

But this strategic juxtaposition is the cause of his apparent falling-out with Musk, who continues to support Robinson, and this is not the first time Farage has tried to 'have his cake and eat it'. At the outset of the Southport riots, while misinformation regarding the stabbing suspect's identity was in full swing online, Farage [questioned](#) "whether the truth is being withheld", later defending his conspiratorial framing of the stabbing as "just asking questions" while unconvincingly denying his words had any inflammatory effect and denouncing "both sides".

He has clearly made the calculation that staying in position relative to Tommy Robinson is preferable to furthering his alliance with Musk, even appearing to laugh it off when the falling-out was raised by Keir Starmer during Prime Minister's Questions. It is likely that Farage considers himself, not without reason, to have been the 'X factor' in all of his political ventures. After he left the UKIP leadership, the party crumbled and has since become a non-entity, and for their part, Reform received a significant boost when he decided to reinstate himself as leader during the 2024 election campaign. YouGov polling suggests 44% more adults know who [Nigel Farage](#) is (whether they approve or disapprove) than the next best-known Reform MP ([Lee Anderson](#)), so in a sense Reform is more the 'Farage show' than anything else. He also knows the Conservatives cannot 'out-Reform' Reform, and therefore cannot 'out-

Farage' Farage, and that Tommy Robinson can serve as a useful point of juxtaposition to make himself seem more palatable to the general electorate.

As a strategic political actor he also likely recognises that, cash or no cash, Musk doubling down on support for the Robinson wing of the British far-right is a liability. Not only are both [Robinson](#) and [Musk](#) as or more unpopular than Starmer (according to YouGov polling), but Farage is nearly 10 points up on all of them. Appearing comparatively moderate to the electorate may lose him the support of Elon Musk, but it could also make him more electable in the eyes of a British public increasingly frustrated at the perceived lack of real change being provided by the Labour government. Does this increase the chance of growth for Reform at the next election? Does it make a confluence with a farther-right Tory party, whether via alliance or merger, more likely? What about his [claimed ambition](#) to become leader of the Conservative party? The latter prospect, whether claimed in jest or not, being particularly concerning considering that of the last 27 Prime Ministers, 18 have been Conservatives.

What can Keir Starmer do?

That [several European leaders](#), including Keir Starmer, have come out in condemnation of Musk's attempts at interference in European democratic processes is a promising show of unity and belief in democratic values. Nonetheless, it will do nothing to counter that interference. Would replicating [Brazil's blocking of X](#) work for the UK? The ban, an initiative of the country's Supreme Court in response to widespread misinformation, eventually led to the platform complying with the court's orders and returning to Brazil. In this case, though, the accounts accused of spreading misinformation were not that of the platform's owner, and the truth is that Musk was never as personally

invested in Brazil as he currently is in British politics. Moreover, the Brazil ban did little to reverse the platform's overall *laissez-faire* attitude to misinformation, and it still operates there. While Britain, like every liberal democracy globally, must do more to ensure borderless (mis)information platforms like X are properly held to account for their impacts on public debate, replicating the Brazilian ban in reaction to Musk's interference risks playing into the very narratives he is spreading.

In any case, with or without Musk's influence, Labour still has a major narrative and communication problem which, in the right wing UK media landscape, risks continuing unabated if the government does not take action. First, to counter the narrative of Labour complicity in the historic abuse of children, championed by the Musk/Robinson nexus but parroted by Jenrick, Truss, and others including Reform UK, clarity and staying above the fray is crucial. Starmer's response to the press during a hospital visit in early January strikes a good balance between a clear debunking of misinformation and a calm detachment from the mudslinging. In the first instance, Starmer recalled his tenure as Director of Public Prosecutions in the early 2010s, during which the first local inquiries into child sexual abuse were made, noting that he directed closed cases to be reopened and revolutionised the prosecution approach to allow for the kinds of trials Tommy Robinson was disrupting to take place.

In the second instance, he did not respond directly to Musk's posts, opting instead to speak on the malicious impact of misinformation on democratic processes and on the threats to the safety of targeted colleagues like Jess Phillips and minority-ethnic communities which such misinformation causes. As his first major public statement on the matter, this was not a bad response at all. The support offered by

Ed Davey of the Liberal Democrats, who condemned Musk's interventions in a [radio interview with Andrew Marr](#), is a promising signal that his party, with 72 MPs ([albeit fewer total votes than Reform in the last election](#)), recognises the outsize threat posed to liberal democracy by this particular brand of far-right populism. But the government should push further: not only by implementing the 20 recommendations of Professor Alexis Jay's 2022 report, but by continually reminding the public both that the Conservative government in power at the time neglected to implement a single one, and that the current Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch was the Minister responsible for Women and Equalities while that neglect was ongoing.

But the farthest-right conspiracies are not the most immediate threat to Starmer's premiership, it is rather the broader landscape that they reflect: the narrative that Labour are not enacting any change is clearly present in the conspiracies surrounding the response to child sexual abuse. It is *that* narrative Farage *et al.* will exploit, and *that* narrative that the government should focus most on countering. Except, unfortunately, they seem to have a major communication problem. The Prime Minister already in December gave a major [speech dubbed a 'reset'](#) outlining six milestones for the government in its first term, following the apparent lack of impact of the [five missions](#) he had argued prior to the election were the core of Labour's approach. These six milestones are: raising living standards, building 1.5 million new homes, ending hospital backlogs, recruiting more police, improving early-life education, and the energy transition. Reinforcing this is the government's approach to communicating its plans for relations with Europe. While government ministers keep insisting a 'reset' of relations with the European Union is a crucial goal of Britain's foreign relations, they remain at pains to reassure Brexit supporters and the right-wing press that ["this does not mean reversing Brexit"](#): Labour seems so preoccupied with

messaging on what this reset is *not* that it [struggles to define what it is](#).

A 'Ming vase' strategy, remaining cagey about bold commitments while giving the incumbent Conservatives enough rope, may well have worked wonders in the 2024 election. When in power, with a massive majority and a populace hungry for change, however, it cannot work. So, what can be done? Delivery is crucial: after fourteen years of managed decline by the Tories combined with the massive economic and strategic error of Brexit, the six new milestones need to be acted upon. That the new milestones are mostly a restatement of previous commitments underlines the communication mess Labour has been overseeing, but nonetheless delivering on these priorities in the next years can help.

The challenge being that growth, one of the government's claimed top priorities, and with [ambitious goals](#) in this regard, seems not to be coming: high levels of borrowing and the pound at its lowest level in a year have caused some observers to predict the Chancellor may be forced to raise taxes. Labour's manifesto pledged not to increase taxes on working people, and there has already been a row on this point over an increase in National Insurance contributions for employers in [the 2024 budget](#). Moreover, the elephant in the room is the economic impact of Brexit, with the independent watchdog Office for Budget Responsibility estimating a [long-term reduction](#) in economic productivity at 4%, and Bloomberg Economics reporting in early 2023 an [annual cost to the economy](#) of GBP 100 billion. Between the obvious economic disaster of Brexit and Labour's pledges, the government finds itself backed into a corner, and delivering on ambitious economic targets (and all the knock-on effects this will have) will be no easy task.

But even if delivery can be done, it may not be enough, as is argued by Deepak Bhargava, Shahrzad Shams, and Harry Hanbury in their article '[The Death of Deliverism](#)'. They cite the United States (US) example: despite a solid economic record for the Biden presidency which measurably improved the material conditions of Americans, Donald Trump was able to win the US election on a message that Biden had in fact worsened the economy. In short, delivery does not translate. Worryingly, one quoted statistic states that 62% of Americans felt that Biden had accomplished "not very much" or "little or nothing". Given the 'do nothing' narrative seems already to be taking hold in the UK, might the horse have already bolted? The overwhelming influence of the right-wing press will certainly ensure the narrative lives on regardless of what may or may not be delivered by the time of the next election. This is why Labour leaderships needs to prioritise an upgrade to its communication with the public: continually communicating what, how, and that they are delivering, rather than merely doing so, is the key.

While delivery and communication on delivery are the long-term necessities, in the immediate term, Labour needs to end the current focus on the Musk/Farage story. Taking back control of the narrative will be a difficult feat, given that the first major interview of the year on the BBC's leading Sunday morning politics broadcast was with Nigel Farage, a measure of his momentum going into 2025. But if the government were to announce a major legislative proposal or policy change that counters the 'do nothing' narrative (albeit in a different area than crime or immigration, the themes most closely associated with the current focus), it is in theory possible to move forward and reclaim the forward-looking 'change' mantra they used in the election.

The [2022 report](#) by the Gordon Brown-led "Commission on the UK's Future" includes a number of such ground-breaking options in the

area of governance reform: the creation of a constitutional statute guiding the sharing of political power within the UK as a union of nations, more power to local administrations and further devolution to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, restrictions on outside earnings for MPs and new laws to eliminate foreign and corrupt money from UK politics. (The latter is particularly relevant in this case.) The most significant suggestion, though, and the one with the most capacity to reclaim a narrative of forward-looking change for this government, is the replacement of the House of Lords with a new, smaller, and electorally legitimate second chamber. Time will tell what – if any – major changes Labour is planning, but as we saw with the [assisted dying debate](#) in late 2024, it is still possible to engage in constructive national debates on serious matters of progressive policy. It is up to Keir Starmer and the Labour government to harness it.

instead to have gathered more momentum and side-stepped all accountability for the consequences of his decades of campaigning on the matter. In disassociating himself from the Musk/Robinson nexus, and making himself seem moderate by comparison, Nigel Farage has played a blinder. If Labour do not do more to counter his momentum and rebuild their own, the far right will pose a much more serious threat at the next election.

Don't be complacent

Writing in the wake of Labour's election win, "[don't be complacent](#)" was the phrase I used in reference to the electoral success of Nigel Farage and Reform UK. The last weeks have only confirmed the momentum held by the far right in Britain. Be in no doubt: no matter the careful positioning Farage engages in *vis-à-vis* figures like Tommy Robinson, this is a pure strategic play, and the positions of each 'faction' are a distinction without a difference. All the more worrying considering the direction of the Conservative party.

In the Sunday morning politics interview on the BBC, it is startling that Farage's championing of the disastrous Brexit was not mentioned once. Such is his ability as a political actor: a man who dedicated his political life to removing the UK from the European Union not only did not disappear once he had achieved his aim but appears

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