

LUNCH WITH FARAGE 'I CAN'T GET SLOSHED'

'Mr Brexit' has tried to reinvent himself as a campaigner on 'culture war' issues and a GB News presenter



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in London

It is Nigel Farage's favourite perch in London. I am sitting at his usual table looking out from a snug in Boisdale, a gloriously eccentric Scottish jazz restaurant in swish Belgravia. Mr Brexit, who also hit the news this summer for bringing down the top brass at NatWest bank, will be 10 minutes late. That gives time to survey from his prime little spot, to see what he sees.

It is barely 12.30pm but already champagne courses like the Thames through the quaint and quirky diningroom. Raffish voices rise and fall in plummy pirouettes amid a din of clinking glasses and peals of laughter. Boisdale is where old-school, right-wing London heads for a "proper f***ing lunch", a PFL – a Farage speciality. I steel myself for what lies ahead.

Boisdale's walls heave with artefacts: old hunting rifles and muskets, antlers and a stuffed boar's head that – I swear – looks like it's grinning. Meanwhile, Farage's favourite corner hideaway is adorned with pictures of foxhounds and vintage Japanese geisha, and a portrait of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the 18th-century throne pretender who failed with a rebellion.

The dreadlocked waiter, who fits seamlessly into this kaleidoscopic vista, glides over to suggest ordering a gin and tonic, as Farage won't countenance anyone sticking to the sparkling water.

He sweeps in. "How are you doing, boss?" asks the waiter, as they greet like old friends. Farage spins to the snug to offer a hearty handshake. "Gin and tonic?" suggest he and the waiter in unison. A G&T for him and sparkling wine for me. We head for the stairs up to Boisdale's famous cigar terrace. Farage likes to smoke and drink first. We can eat and drink later.

He is accosted on the way by one of the plummy pirouettiers. "Good to see you again, you old b**tard," roars the man, who slaps Farage's back so hard I fear he may collapse a lung. Rah rah. Chums reunited. It is an entertaining sight, and to an outsider's eye as British as clotted cream.

The former leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip) and founder of the Brexit Party has quit front-line politics. Farage's main role now is as a presenter on GB News, a right-wing television channel that pitches itself as an antidote to liberal consensus.

"I mustn't go in sloshed this evening," he winks.

Yet anyone who spends any time in Britain these days knows that Farage remains the biggest political draw in the country apart from, perhaps, Boris Johnson. Both have their gaping flaws and their armies of critics, none of whom have their charisma.

Farage is still box office. This was evident from his recent destruction of the leadership of NatWest, whose chairman and chief executive resigned after Farage revealed its Courts unit had closed his account because it didn't like his populist politics.

Potshots

Touted even by some of his enemies as one of Britain's most consequential politicians of recent decades, many readily concede that Brexit would never have happened without Farage's years of agitating. But he insists that now he is more effective taking potshots from the sidelines.

Farage has reinvented himself as a campaigner on culture war issues including immigration – one of the biggest political divides in Britain.

"What I found out during my years of doing politics is that what really excites me is shifting the centre of public opinion. Today I'll throw this grenade and it's going to make a bang," he says.

The Conservative government appears terrified of him and his enduring sway over its voters. He says the thought of causing trouble for the Tory elite catapults him out of bed. So, does he simply enjoy the mischief, the needling of those he despises?

He purrs conspiratorially. "Oh yeah. It was always in me. Even in school I loved winding everyone up." The counter argument is that issues such as Brexit and especially immigration can have real consequences, often dramatic, for ordinary people's lives. Mischief for one can beget misery for another.

We tramp up the wooden stairs to the calm sanctity of the smoking terrace. Farage lights up, then beams as he reveals his thoughts on almost every Irish politician he has ever met.

Mary Lou McDonald of Sinn Féin – "we always got on well when she was in Europe". Gerry Adams – "not exactly top of the pops with us because some of my family were in the British army". Leo Varadkar – "we had some fun once or twice, and he even asked me for a selfie."

He adds: "One day there will be a United Ireland. But it's not on the horizon immediately. Just for practical reasons."

As for his former press officer Hermann Kelly, president of the hard-right Irish Freedom Party: "Dear old Hermann. He doubled as security – a big strong strapping Paddy." Sparkling wine almost shoots through my nostrils at "Paddy". I hold it together, internally shrug and move on. Farage, smiling unostentatiously, trundles over niceties like a politically incorrect, boisterous man-puppy.

To Irish eyes he personifies a certain type of Englishness. Yet he is quick to declare affection for Ireland. His great-grandmother was Irish, he says. In his early 20s Farage almost lost his legs when he was run over by a car. He married his hospital



nurse, Grainne Hayes, the mother of his two sons (they later divorced). Her parents came from Annascaul on the Dingle peninsula in Co Kerry.

"We in Britain have this historical affinity with Ireland that can't be lost. We've got all these relationships, see? I have huge love and respect for the Republic. I just think you're in the wrong place on the European Union."

Farage also rejects the accusation that Brexit or his anti-immigration needling are forms of race-baiting. "Young people have been told [by Remainers and media] that Brexit is a racist project, so you can't blame them for believing it in some cases."

Time to plough on with lunch. Farage obliterates the G&T and bounces downstairs. The waiter is over like a shot. Farage asks about the special. Crown of grouse, says the waiter. "Oh, I say." Yet he relents; he has eaten too much grouse lately.

For Farage, it is crispy squid for starters followed by rib-eye steak with chips and peppercorn sauce – "good, simple food". I order scallops followed by the grouse. Farage insists on sauvignon blanc for both of us to lubricate the starters. We will wash down the main course afterwards with claret.

The PFL is gathering momentum, along with my sense of dread at the potential hangover.

The sauvignon blanc disappears as Farage hopscoches his way through a litany of Anglo-Irish topics. He talks excitedly about John Hemingway, the 104-year-old Dubliner who is the last surviving member of "the Few", the RAF fighter pilots who fought the Battle of Britain.

Farage says he owns the Crimean War medals and records of an Irish soldier in

the British army. "Court martialled eight times for drunkenness," he exclaims with a throaty cackle.

He is interested in the 1916 Rising. The British, he concedes, "f***ed it up". He ponders if things might have turned out differently for Irish history if the British hadn't fed nationalist anger by executing the Rising's leaders. "Probably not I suppose. But who knows?"

During the EU Lisbon Treaty referendums in Ireland in 2008 and 2009, Farage's Ukip and its Eurosceptic colleagues in the EU's parliament were accused of interfering. He proudly recalls marshalling EU cash to pay for a Eurosceptic anti-Lisbon leaflet that was delivered to almost every household in Ireland right before the second vote.

'Stunts'

"[Hermann] Kelly and I, my God, we got up to some stunts. We were in a group in the parliament with access to European funds that could be used to spread information about the EU. When they set all of this up, they naturally assumed it would be used to spread positive information. They never factored in someone like me. We got on to the Irish post office, and did that huge mail-out."

Farage guffaws at what was blatant interference in domestic Irish affairs. He doesn't care. The "best bit" of the leaflet was the image of a syringe warning that the EU could force euthanasia on Ireland. He says he was entitled to play rough because the EU did the same to him.

"I remember 50 of us having a party in the press bar in Strasbourg [after Dutch voters had rejected the forerunner to Lisbon]. Walking down the corridor was

“You'll never get me on Trump. The reason we've stayed friends all this time is that I never disclose anything. That's good for him

Jo Leinen, a dour German socialist, a senior dude in the EU. I said, 'Jo will you join us for a glass of champagne to celebrate this outbreak of national democracy?' He said, 'You can have your little victory. We have 50 different ways to win'."

Farage says this exchange convinced him the EU project is "vile. It's evil. It's awful. It's not even undemocratic. It's anti-democratic. They want a superstate".

He has sung the same tune for decades. He rejects the obvious retort that the EU has, plainly, been a driver of prosperity in Ireland. He argues it would have happened anyway. We waste much time, and claret, debating it. Neither sways the other.

Farage says he is still in touch with Declan Ganley, the prominent anti-Lisbon campaigner from the first, defeated Lisbon referendum. "He wants me to go shooting snipe with him this autumn," he says. He often visits friends in Ireland. People are "inquisitive" when they spot him in Dublin pubs. "One or two are rude but most people aren't."

Closer to home, in Britain, he is more careful about where he goes due to his notoriety.

"I've got four or five places I like to go. I want to avoid aggro from fanatical Remainers and globalists. Other people try to love you to death. I don't use public transport. You can't live a normal life."

Aside from Brexit, some of his other interventions in British politics in recent years have been significant. He helped to fatally weaken Theresa May as prime minister when his Brexit Party outflanked the Tories in 2019 EU elections.

A week later he met Johnson's father, Stanley Johnson, in Boisdale. "He shook my hand and said, 'Thank you, thank you Nigel. Boris is going to be PM, now, isn't he?'"

Farage has only a "reasonable" relationship with the ousted Johnson. He says he "always knew Johnson would fail ... He is lazy, doesn't read his briefs".

Apostle

What does he think of Johnson as a politician and as a man? "Two different questions. As a person? I first met him 30 years ago. There are a bizarre set of insecurities in him. The private Boris is different from the public one. He's much more introverted in private, but still fun to be with," he says.

"But politically he doesn't believe in anything," says Farage, who is a true apostle of Thatcherite economics.

"Boris is pretty much metropolitan elite. Not particularly conservative at all. But I am very grateful he joined Leave. We needed Boris. We needed a bit of [cross-party member of the House of Lords] Kate Hoey too. Boris was popular in Surrey and Cheshire, people who were middle class with a bit of money. He reassured those voters in a way that I couldn't."

He continues: "Kate was the most important for reaching Labour voters. Had it been just me, Leave would have only got 44 per cent. We wouldn't have won

[without them]." Hoey served in Tony Blair's government in the 1990s. She stepped down as a Labour MP at the 2019 Westminster election. A strong supporter of Brexit, the Co Antrim-born politician was given a peerage by Johnson.

The Brexit vote partly inspired Donald Trump's campaign for US president in 2016. Farage jumped on the anti-immigrant, populist Trump train long before it had gathered enough steam to plough to the White House. He campaigned early for Trump, becoming popular on the US Republican Party's right wing. Farage and Trump have remained close ever since.

"You'll never get me on Trump. The reason we've stayed friends all this time is that I never disclose anything. That's good for him. He's surrounded by people selling stories off the back of him. So I've kept that relationship as it is."

Assuming he wins the nomination, does he think Trump will beat president Joe Biden?

"Biden will not be the candidate," he insists. "[His health] is getting worse quickly. His party knows it. He's an embarrassment to the party and to the country. It's over for him."

But what if it's not, and Biden is actually fine? "He's not. He talks cobblers half the time."

Farage reckons Trump has a "better than 50 per cent" chance of winning the presidency. He has one "concern", however. "Georgia," he says, referencing the legal case against Trump in the southern state over allegations that he tried to force officials to "find" votes to defeat Biden in 2020.

'Crackers'

Farage's relationship with Trump was so close after his presidential victory that there were rumours (probably welcomed by his friends) that he could even be appointed US ambassador. He says he is "disappointed" that the British government didn't capitalise on his access to Trump by giving him a formal job.

US ambassador would always have been controversial, he concedes. "But maybe they could have made me an envoy or something. But they didn't, because the Foreign Office hate me."

He is also said to have been blocked in recent years for an honour or peerage. "I don't care," he says, not that convincingly.

His self-confidence in his ability to spot political trends is undimmed.

"The rightward political shifts we have seen in recent years are here to stay. Sometimes I can see ahead. It sounds crackers, and I'm not saying I'm David Icke. But sometimes I can see the direction of travel."

The claret bottle empty, the G&Ts demolished, the sauvignon gone too, the direction of travel for Farage is off to meet someone else, before heading to GB News where he will do his latest show, apparently unsloshed.

For his lunch companion, the only direction of travel is home to pick up the pieces the next morning.

■ Former Ukip leader Nigel Farage in London this week.

Below: Farage interviewing his friend Donald Trump for GB News at the Trump Turnberry golf course in Scotland in May.

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