

Farage unravelled

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I watched too much television news last night.

There was much coverage of Badenoch's sacking of Jenrick.

And then there was the Reform show as Jenrick, re-emerged late, in a hastily arranged Farage news conference.

Jenrick came out of this looking a lot less clever than he likes to think he is.

Badenoch was the clear winner of the day: rarely can an opposition leader as weak as she is have done so well.

But Farage interested me most. He looked uncomfortable, annoyed, and simply out of sorts with himself as a news agenda over which it turned out he had little control developed around him, and that matters.

Leadership of anything is about being able to react to events as much as it is about being able to stage them. We all know Farage can stage events. The stunt, the news conference, the appearance of being the "cheeky upstart"; all of these are things Farage has fine-tuned to the point where the novelty must have well and truly worn off, even for the most ardent fan. But what really matters is how you manage the unexpected, and Farage gave us a rare insight into that yesterday.

He was annoyed that Jenrick was late, apparently because he got lost in Millbank Tower (which, in fairness, is not hard: the lifts are perverse in the floors they serve, as I recall, and I have been there many times), and it showed. But more than that, he looked bored, indecisive and maybe just a little resentful as Jenrick spoke.

Let's be honest, I suspect 20 minutes on Jenrick's political philosophy was boring. Forgetting to mention the glory of his new leader for that length of time was probably not wise. As already noted, Jenrick is not nearly as clever as he would like to think he is. But that being said, Farage revealed three things.

The first was that he does not like not being in charge, and political leaders have to realise that events sometimes run them, and vice versa. Yesterday did not run according to his agenda. It could have done: he could have delayed things, but he did not. He could have kept control, but he did not. In that case, what he revealed is that he might not have the aptitude to be a political leader at all. When out of control, he looked very out of sorts.

Second, he does not like being upstaged, and he had been and very obviously resented it.

Thirdly, he made it clear why he finds it so hard to preserve the loyalty of those who supposedly support him, as we have seen with the steady attrition of MPs elected as Reform members who have already departed the party. Unless feigning loyalty is offered, I very strongly suspect that withering contempt flows in the other direction, and very quickly. Jenrick will, I suspect, be on the end of that by this morning, being soundly put in his place by another leader who does not see him as their heir apparent.

This was not a jolly jape for Jenrick.

This told us a lot about Farage.

What it said was that Reform is becoming a refuge for failed and toxic Tories whose sole remaining qualification for office is their arrogance in the face of their own indifference, not least towards their own lack of ability. But it also said something more than that. It said Farage lacks a decisive bite. He failed to run this. He did not make Jenrick wait to show him who is in charge, and paid a heavy price for that. He did not lay down the rules, as a leader should have done. And he then very obviously showed he realised he had made a mistake, and that was not clever.

Was this a one-off mistake or the revelation of something deeper? I cannot be sure, of course, but I tend towards the second view. There has been little to upset the Farage stage management. This did, and he failed badly. This man would make a very bad prime minister.