SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Now the Liberal Democrats were jubilant after holding onto Chris Huhne’s seat at the Eastleigh by-election on Thursday, but the pictures that dominated the papers afterwards were of Nigel Farage, the UK Independence Party Leader, celebrating in style. They may not have won Eastleigh, but UKIP’s strong showing in a constituency where they had little track record has given them a boost. So after winning 28 per cent of the vote and pushing the Tories into third place, was it rather more than a protest vote? Well Nigel Farage joins me this morning. Good morning. You must be kicking yourself this morning because potentially if you had stood, I mean you could be sitting here as UKIP’s first Member of Parliament?

NIGEL FARAGE:
Well we had a very good candidate in Diane James. There’s no evidence I would have got any more votes than her.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Really?
NIGEL FARAGE:
No, absolutely none whatsoever. And the point is the reason I didn’t stand is I want to lead the party into the European Elections, which take place next year, where I believe we can cause a really historic result. So we didn’t quite get over the line. The postal vote system in by-elections really does count against us because there simply isn’t time to reach everybody. But, look, no complaints. We’re delighted, it’s our best ever parliamentary performance, and I think there’s every reason to believe that there’ll be more to come.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
I suppose perhaps you’ve been quite canny because actually if you had stood and won that seat, you could have - if it was really just a protest vote - you could have lost it quite clearly at the next election.

NIGEL FARAGE:
Well the protest vote thing is the default position for the establishment - oh it’s just a protest vote. Mid-term …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You yourself admitted there was an element of protest vote.

NIGEL FARAGE:
… mid-term …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
I heard you on the day after.

NIGEL FARAGE:
… mid-term, don’t worry, it’ll all disappear. Yeah some people who voted UKIP probably used it as a chance to stick two fingers up to the establishment, but …

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Well I mean if you just look at figures, I mean Lord Ashcroft …

NIGEL FARAGE:
No, but …

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
… 83 per cent of UKIP voters said they were sending a message that they were unhappy with the party.

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
Eighty-three per cent of UKIP voters look at our three established parties and say they’re all social democrats, you can’t put a cigarette paper between them on policy, there’s nothing to choose, we’re not being given a real choice, and no-one speaks for us. They don’t just vote UKIP because they dislike the other three. They vote UKIP on policy. And what we’re saying to people, we’re putting ahead … in front of them is a commonsense idea of how we should control our borders, of what our relationship with Europe should be, of what we should be doing about the looming energy crisis. So actually people vote for UKIP because they see us offering policy solutions.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
But a lot of them, you know yourself, there was a big element of protest vote, wasn’t there? I mean a lot of people were doing it, were voting UKIP because they wanted to stop other parties?

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
It’s a rejection of our current political class who when it comes to really tough issues like open door immigration and the prospect of Romania and Bulgaria having full access to Britain next year, all they want to do is sweep it under the carpet. We’re prepared to talk about it.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
Right, so your next challenge - the May elections …

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
Yeah.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
… the local elections. You polled around 13 per cent of the vote last time. That was
five points more than the year before. Go on, give us your predictions. Where are you going to be this time? Are we going to see sort of 28 per cent of the vote?

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
I mean the first thing we’re going to do is to fight those elections on a bigger scale than ever before. I’m hoping that we’re going to put two thousand candidates into the field, and what we need to do as a party is to establish breakthroughs. Now the difficulty for UKIP is that our support comes from across the spectrum. If you read today’s Sunday papers, you would think there’s a pitch battle between UKIP and the Conservative Party going on. Only a third of our vote in Eastleigh came from the Conservatives. Two thirds came from Lib-Lems, Labour and people who hadn’t voted for anybody for the last twenty years. So we’re going to fight broadly in these elections. We’ve got some ideas where we’re going to target and what we need to do in May is make some breakthroughs.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
Yeah, you really do need to make some breakthroughs …

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
Yes.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
… because obviously you raised your increase of the vote last time round, but that translated to, what, one more councillor.

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
Yeah.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
I mean that is your problem at the moment. You may get the headlines, you may take these large shares of the votes in something like Eastleigh, but it’s not translating yet, is it?

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
No because you know we live under a first past the post system and normally new parties that come along have a geographical bias - the Scottish National Party - or they draw from a certain segment of the population, be it poor people or rich people, and UKIP draws from across the board. So our strength is we exist everywhere, we can do well absolutely everywhere in the country, but our weakness at the moment is we don’t have the hotspots where we’ve got clusters of already elected councillors and that’s what we’re working on.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

What about the television debates coming up before the next election. Do you think you’ve got a stronger case now or not?

**NIGEL FARAGE:**

Well I think that depends. I mean look you know …

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

I mean David Cameron has said no, hasn’t he, quite clearly?

**NIGEL FARAGE:**

Well of course. He’d rather not debate anything. No, the point is we’ve got to make some breakthroughs in local elections and we’ll also be judged very much on what happens in the European Elections in 2014 because that will determine where we are in the national opinion polls. But I mean quite honestly if we were at this kind of level heading up to 2015, to be excluded from those debates would be absolutely ludicrous.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

It’s quite interesting looking at the papers this morning. I mean there’s sort of talk about the European Convention on Human Rights, taking Britain out of that …

**NIGEL FARAGE:**

Ah yes … yeah.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

… and also limiting access to immigrants on the NHS. But you know the
Conservatives potentially, if they go forward with all that, they’re going to take the wind out of your sails, aren’t they?

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
Yeah jam tomorrow. That’s what we keep hearing from the Conservatives - promises about what they might do if they win the next General Election - just as we heard the same promises from them before the election of 2010. I think the real problem that the Conservatives have got isn’t UKIP. The real problem they’ve got is their own supporters look at a Conservative Party that used to talk about wealth creation, low tax, enterprise. It now talks about gay marriage and wind farms. And when these promises are made, no-one believes them anymore.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
Okay Nigel Farage, thank you very much.

**NIGEL FARAGE:**
Thank you.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**