

Beat: News

UKIP EU lawmaker in hospital after altercation with colleague

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USPA NEWS - Steven Woolfe, a candidate to be the new leader of Britain's anti-EU UK Independence Party, was recovering in hospital after suffering seizures on Thursday following an "altercation" with a colleague at a meeting about the party's future.

"Britain wants to leave, but doesn't want to pay. That's not possible," Hollande said in a speech at the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris.

"Britain decided to go for a Brexit, in fact I believe a hard Brexit. Well we have to follow through with Britain's wishes to leave the European Union and we have to be firm. If not we will put into question the EU's principles," he said.

(Reporting By Jean-Baptiste Vey,; writing by John Irish, editing by Angus MacSwan)

Described as "unseemly behaviour" between "two grown men" by UKIP's leader, the incident took place as the UKIP members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in Strasbourg, sought to clear the air amid factional infighting which has grown since Britons voted to leave the European Union in June.

Brexit has shaken all parties across the British political spectrum, leading to Conservative Theresa May replacing David Cameron as prime minister, a leadership election in the opposition Labour Party and deep division in UKIP as to its purpose now it has achieved its goal of securing EU withdrawal.

The party was plunged into chaos on Wednesday when its leader Diane James quit just 18 days after being elected to replace Nigel Farage, the high profile party chief who announced he would step down after the vote for Brexit.

Woolfe had angered some in his party when he said he would stand as a leadership candidate to replace James but then also admitted he had considered defecting to join May's ruling Conservatives.

"It shouldn't have happened. We're talking about a dispute that finished up physically," Farage, who has resumed his role as interim UKIP leader, told reporters outside the Strasbourg hospital where Woolfe was recovering.

"It's two grown men getting involved in an altercation. It's not very seemly behaviour. It's made us look like we're violent."

He declined to name the other man involved and said there would be an inquiry. Roger Helmer, one of the UKIP MEPs at the meeting where the altercation occurred, said there had been "a lively exchange of views" at the meeting.

Several British newspapers cited an aide to another MEP Mike Hookem, UKIP's defence spokesman, denying reports that he had punched Woolfe. "Mike did not touch him," the unnamed woman was quoted as saying, adding it was a purely "verbal altercation".

Hookem, 62, could not be reached for comment. On his website, the former army commando describes himself as "a working class lad from ... Hull, who calls a spade a spade".

Woolfe collapsed about two hours after the incident and lost consciousness outside the EU legislature's chamber after taking part in votes. Pictures showed him sprawled face down, still clutching a briefcase on a walkway in the parliament building.

Farage said Woolfe had passed out and suffered two seizures, one quite major, but scans had shown no blood clot or bleeding on the brain.

"I am sitting up and said to be looking well. The only consequence at the moment is a bit of numbness on the left-hand side of my face," said Woolfe, who marked his 49th birthday on Thursday, in a statement.

He should be discharged from hospital on Friday, Farage said.

'HIT HEAD ON WINDOW'

UKIP's Welsh leader Neil Hamilton, who was not at the meeting but said he had been given an account of what had happened by an eyewitness, told BBC TV that Woolfe had picked a fight and then been knocked over and hit his head on a window. French police and prosecutors in Strasbourg told Reuters that they were not investigating the case for the time being.

Once dismissed by former prime minister Cameron as "fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists", UKIP now has 22 MEPs, two more than either the Conservatives or Labour, after winning the May 2014 European Parliament election on a surge of eurosceptic sentiment.

That pushed Cameron to agree to hold a referendum on quitting the EU but since then the party, which has only one Westminster lawmaker, has struggled with its identity.

Farage resumed overall leadership of the party on Wednesday after James quit less than three weeks into the job saying she did not have sufficient authority or the full support of UKIP MEPs.

Hours later Woolfe said he would put his name forward to be leader but caused consternation when he said he had flirted with leaving the party.

"I have been enthused by the start to Theresa May's premiership," he said in a statement announcing his candidacy.

"The growing evidence that she is committed to a clean Brexit prompted me, as it did many of my friends and colleagues, to wonder whether our future was within her new Conservative Party."

Woolfe had been the original favourite to take over from Farage but was excluded from the leadership ballot after submitting his nomination papers late.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com