

SPRINGTIME FOR HITLER?

Recent elections in France and the Netherlands have highlighted the revival of the far right in Europe. Simon Titley examines the causes and considers a Liberal response

At June's EU summit meeting in Seville, the EU's leaders were originally due to debate the enlargement of the EU. However, at the prompting of Tony Blair and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, the focus switched instead to the issue of immigration.

But there is no rational reason why immigration should be an issue at all. The number of immigrants attempting to enter the EU is only half what it was ten years ago, at the height of conflict in Yugoslavia. The birth rate in the EU has fallen to approximately 1.4 children per woman, which means the indigenous labour force will increasingly be unable to sustain the tax bill for pensions or healthcare. If every would-be immigrant and asylum seeker were admitted to the EU, it would still not be enough to compensate for the fall in the birth rate.

Consider also the benefits that immigrants bring. They contribute more to the economy per head than the indigenous population, mainly because a higher proportion are of working age, but also because they tend to be more entrepreneurial. We also know that societies that welcome immigrants are more vibrant, economically and culturally. There is a strong correlation between immigration and economic success. A new study by American Professor Richard Florida, in his book 'The Rise of the Creative Class', shows how the economic success of cities is directly linked to whether they are attractive places to live for bohemians, gays and ethnic minorities.

If immigration is not an issue on a rational level, why is there a problem? The answer is that it is an issue on an emotional level. A significant proportion of the public feels insecure and sees immigration as a threat to its identity. Attempts to justify immigration on rational economic grounds will not cut any ice, because they do not address the real problem.

While 'immigration' has become the focus of insecurity, let us be honest about the terms 'immigration' and 'asylum seekers'. These are code words for race. This is about old-fashioned colour prejudice. In Britain, tens of thousands of white South Africans, Australians and New Zealanders overstay their visas each year, yet no one regards that as an issue.

However, this does not explain why so many people in Western Europe feel insecure and why they choose to support the far right. This is not simply a replay of the 1920s and 1930s. Then, poverty and economic crisis were the breeding ground for the rise of fascism. Nowadays, mass unemployment and hyperinflation no

longer apply and most West Europeans lead relatively prosperous lives.

Today, the main source of insecurity is globalisation, which has destabilised society in two ways. First, it limits conventional politicians' freedom of manoeuvre and ability to deliver, which undermines public confidence in the democratic process. Second, it creates social dislocation and promotes a form of cosmopolitanism that leaves many people unsure of their identity.

Professor Terry Eagleton identified this problem in an article published two years ago: "The more culture comes to mean a vacuous cosmopolitanism for the privileged few, the more it comes to mean a militant particularism for the dispossessed. The more emptily global Culture waxes, the more virulently blind cultures grow. For every jet-setting intellectual, a neo-Nazi thug; for every transnational executive, a local patriot for whom the Other begins just beyond the mountains."

The far right has learned how to feed off the insecurity produced by globalisation, by promoting an exclusive form of identity politics. Globalisation has weakened national identities without providing a viable alternative. The global cosmopolitanism preached by political and business elites is fine for 'knowledge workers' who can take advantage of the new mobility. The less privileged are easy prey for far right populists, who seek to revive old national identities through the exclusion of minorities.

The centrist political establishment attempts to justify globalisation on the grounds that it ensures widespread prosperity and freedom, but the far right understands that it also produces losers. We tend to think of these losers as unskilled manual workers whose jobs were automated or exported to the third world. We forget that many more affluent people in previously secure occupations, such as middle managers and office workers, are also losing their jobs or are finding their incomes in relative decline.

The far right blames 'immigrants' (i.e. anyone who looks recognisably different) for the effects of globalisation. It taps into traditional nationalist identities to revive a fear of minorities and outsiders. It also benefits from increasingly dumbed-down media, where the emotive 'soundbite' predominates, and superficial arguments, novelty and sensationalism can always score over mature and deliberative debate.

In eight West European countries, there are now far right parties enjoying significant electoral support, and

in some cases forming part of coalition governments. In each case, they run on an anti-immigrant and anti-refugee platform, blame non-whites for crime and unemployment, and often promote some form of 'repatriation' policy for non-whites.

France is seen as top of this dubious league table, even though far right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen failed to win the Presidency or even a single seat in the subsequent parliamentary elections. The significance of Le Pen's success in the first round of the Presidential election was more symbolic than statistical. It was about shock value rather than a massive swing in votes.

Le Pen's vote increased only marginally, from 15.0 % in the previous presidential election in 1995 to 16.9% in 2002, and from 4.5 million votes to 4.8 million. However, winning a place in the second round ensured that Le Pen became the only issue in the election; no one discussed political programmes. Despite failing to win anything, Le Pen will not have been disappointed by the shock he delivered to the system.

Le Pen's success was a product of widespread political alienation, amplified by the electoral system. France's two-stage electoral system made Le Pen's coup possible but does not provide a complete explanation. Le Pen's vote would not have had as much of an impact under either a first-past-the post or a proportional voting system. Moreover, in a two-round system, voters have tended to vote with their hearts in their first round and their heads in the second.

The key to Le Pen's success was a general disillusionment with the political establishment and boredom with the mainstream parties. In France, as elsewhere in the west, a combination of globalisation and the collapse of communism created a situation where mainstream politicians, whether ostensibly right or left wing, propose very similar platforms, and have less ability to deliver on their promises. France is a centralised country and the ruling elite is perceived in the French provinces as a remote, Parisian establishment, which fails to listen to people's concerns. Voters feel abandoned, neglected and alienated.

This situation was made worse by five years of 'cohabitation' in the French government, where President Chirac shared executive power with Prime Minister Jospin. Since both shared responsibility for the previous five years of government, neither was in a position to differentiate their platforms.

Adding to the sense of boredom was complacency, a widely held assumption that Chirac and Jospin would inevitably fight the final round and that it was therefore safe in the first round to abstain or indulge in a protest vote for either Le Pen or another fringe candidate.

The support for Le Pen's 'Front National' party was not a flash in the pan, but represented the culmination of thirty years of steady growth. Though not represented in the national parliament, the FN has won seats in a number of regional assemblies and municipalities. It has appealed particularly to older and poorer urban white voters who feel insecure and marginalized. Significantly, in this year's first round of the Presidential vote, Le Pen scored highest among unemployed voters (38%).

Like all his far right counterparts in Europe, Le Pen has targeted the widely held feelings of insecurity. His key issues were crime and immigration, with the latter used a scapegoat for the former. The focus of hostility is France's large Arabic minority (mostly of Algerian or

Moroccan origin), although Le Pen wants all non-white people 'repatriated'.

The second European country to receive widespread attention this year was the Netherlands. The list led by the maverick far right populist Pim Fortuyn (who was assassinated days before the poll) won 17% of the vote in May's general election, to become the second largest party in the national parliament. Two months earlier in municipal elections, Fortuyn's 'Liveable Rotterdam' group gained control of the city of Rotterdam. Fortuyn's platform was unusual for a far right party, in that he was gay and attacked Islamic immigrants as a threat to the Dutch permissive society.

The most startling thing about Fortuyn's (posthumous) success was that his party came from nowhere, having been founded only a few months before the elections. A complacent centrist political establishment, used to trading in polite euphemisms, had no idea how to respond. While Fortuyn's party has no long-term future without its leader, his legacy will remain. Fortuyn succeeded in shattering the cosy political consensus and Dutch politics will never be the same again.

A similar pattern has developed in six other European countries. The most prominent far right success before this year was in Austria, where the 'Freedom Party', led by the charismatic Jörg Haider, won 26.9% of the vote in the parliamentary elections in 2000, and is now part of a conservative coalition government.

In Belgium, the 'Vlaams Blok' (Flemish Bloc) won 9.9% of the vote in the 1999 national parliamentary elections. It is the largest party on Antwerp city council. Only a pact by all the other mainstream parties excludes it from power.

In Denmark, the 'Danish People's Party' won 12% of the vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections and supports the new ruling coalition (though remains outside the government). ELDR member party Venstre leads this coalition, and seems to have had few if any scruples about treating with the far right.

In Italy, the 'National Alliance' (the direct political descendant of Mussolini's party) won 12% of the vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections. It is part of Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government and its leader Gianfranco Fini is now Deputy Prime Minister. Also in the coalition government is the 'Northern League', a far right regionalist party from the north of Italy, which won 3.9% of the vote.

In Norway, the 'Progress Party' won 14.6% of the vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections, to become Norway's second largest party. Although not part of the government, the party holds the balance of power.

In Switzerland, the 'Swiss People's Party' won 23% of the vote in the 1999 parliamentary elections, to become the second largest party, entitling it to cabinet posts.

Why are there are not similar far right parties in the rest of Europe? The answer is that there are, but they typically win less than 2% of the vote. The key factor behind their success or failure is whether the mainstream parties are offering voters a sufficient contrast and choice. If mainstream conservative parties pursue right-wing policies, there is less opportunity for the extreme right. If mainstream parties are locked into consensus policies because they are part of a broad coalition, then extremists are able to fill the vacuum.

But there are other important criteria for attracting wide support. Successful far right parties have a

charismatic leader (Le Pen, Haider, Fortuyn) able to create a contrast with the bland, equivocal leaders of mainstream parties. Far right parties must appear unified to be successful, and avoid the tendency of extremist parties to split into rival factions. They also have to adopt a more respectable image and either shed or conceal any violent 'skinhead' support.

Long term, the danger of the far right is obvious. Persecution begins with Muslims, then other non-white people, then Jews, gays, gypsies and so on. It has happened before and it can happen again.

The more immediate risk is that mainstream politicians either fail to address the underlying causes of insecurity and voter alienation, which leads to greater political instability, or attempt to appease far right opinion by adopting stricter laws on immigration.

The debate in Seville showed that this is already happening. Centrist governments, in a state of panic over the threat of the far right, hope that adopting stricter anti-immigration policies will solve the problem. All it does is make racist fears respectable and move the mainstream closer to the far right.

In practice, there is little that governments can do to prevent immigration. Like the so-called 'war on drugs', anti-immigration policies generate a criminal industry (in this case, people trafficking). They also raise popular expectations that illegal immigration will be stopped, which politicians cannot meet. Failure to deliver takes popular respect for politicians down another notch.

The rise of the far right also has serious implications for the European Union. The period of consensus, which has characterised politics since the collapse of communism in 1989, is coming to an end. There are likely to be some starker choices made about economics, society and politics. This adversarial debate would pose serious constitutional problems for the EU, which functions on the basis of consensus. The other danger is that far right demagogues will set the political agenda and force mainstream politicians to pursue more small-minded and isolationist policies. Such a trend would risk undermining the whole European political project.

Liberals need to rethink their response to these trends. First, no matter how strong the economic case for immigration, rational arguments by themselves will not work. If politicians argue for open borders or large-scale immigration without addressing the sources of people's feelings of insecurity, the political risks are very high.

Liberals could make a distinctive contribution to the debate by arguing for an immigration policy as opposed to an anti-immigration policy. A positive policy, similar to America's green card system, which emphasises positive criteria for entry rather than negative criteria for non-entry, would have the merit of fairness while demonstrating that necessary roles in our society are being filled. For example, few people object to the recruitment of teachers or nurses from abroad, because they know these jobs must be done. There is also a case for introducing a symbolic citizenship ceremony, as in Australia or the USA, which provides a rite of passage for both new immigrants and the host community.

Next, Liberals have to rethink their ideas about identity. I remain a strong supporter of the EU, but there is no evidence that the EU's institutions are providing an adequate substitute for national or regional identities. A 'European' identity can

complement but not replace them. Political and business elites may feel at ease in an international world but most people still need a sense of place and identity.

The concept of identity is not inherently racist. Yet it has been discredited by twenty years of politically correct propaganda. In England, especially, the bourgeois left has engaged in an extended bout of national self-abasement, while indulging in absurd pseudo-ethnic posturing. You've probably met the type. They lap up Irish folk music while deriding English folk music, even though these musical forms are similar. They fill their homes with ethnic knick-knacks and cheer on every English sporting defeat. They promote the fashion for 'victim chic' and publish reports saying that the term 'British' is racist.

They have sought to delegitimise English identity by denying people pride in the good things about their society. They justify these right-on postures in terms of atonement for colonialism, yet deny cultural validity to the least advantaged English people rather than the elites responsible for past injustices. Liberals should have nothing to do with this sort of over-compensating. Instead, we might learn something from the way in which ordinary decent people reclaimed the English flag during this year's World Cup.

Liberals must also abandon their belief in consensus politics, which has a stultifying effect on democracy. One of the main criticisms of PR was that it let in far right parties. The problem is rather that it can provide fertile ground for extremists by creating a permanent centrist government, where all the mainstream parties are locked into a consensus and offer no real choice.

Finally, Liberals have to examine the question of globalisation. It should be judged on its merits, not assumed to be necessarily good or inevitable. Liberals have always had the distinction of arguing that things should serve people rather than people serve things, and there is no reason why this philosophy should not inform our economic policies.

We should reject the notion that arose in the 1980s, that business exists in some sort of moral bubble and is not subject to any social obligations or the norms of civilised behaviour. It is not acceptable if people are thrown on the scrap heap or left in an increasingly insecure position. Business is not sacrosanct and we should not accept new economic arrangements that ruin people's lives through no fault of their own.

Globalisation is bringing about dramatic changes in the world economy and we must understand that there are both winners and losers. Political and business leaders inhabit a cosmopolitan world. They tend to forget that, while they see globalising forces as opportunities, other people perceive them as threats. Political extremism is always fuelled by individual feelings of insecurity. If any groups feel excluded, the door is left open to extremist politicians to exploit popular fears and damage freedom and prosperity for everyone.