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The Politics of Western Immigration

STEPHEN E. SCHEELE*

I. INTRODUCTION

Not surprisingly, immigration remains a central issue in politics around the world, particularly in western developed countries. While most societies embrace immigrants and the benefits that a healthy immigration policy can yield, the politics of fear, hatred, and racism inevitably enter into the picture. Immigrant groups often find themselves associated with increases in crime and unemployment, as well as social fragmentation. Thus, countries of the world are left to come to terms with these types of competing elements in their immigration policies. This paper highlights some of the recent developments in the politics of immigration arising in the western democracies of Europe and North America.

II. EUROPE

More than in any other region of the world, immigration is at the forefront of nearly all European political agendas. More foreigners now live in the historically homogenous European continent than at any other time, and the wave of immigration continues to grow. European governments and citizenry are wary of what continued large-scale immigration will mean for the future of their countries. Invariably, far-right political groups, with their anti-immigrant stances, have been able to garner support throughout Europe from citizen groups who have been disillusioned by failing economies.

By the end of 1994, it was estimated that at least 339 militant far-right groups were active throughout the countries of Europe and the former Soviet Union.¹ Included among these numbers were an estimated seventy-eight groups in Russia, thirty-four in both Austria and Germany, twenty-eight in France, and eighteen in the United Kingdom.² While the majority of these groups are in fact small and radical, with little appeal to the mainstream, they are nevertheless emerging upon the political landscape of the thirty-two

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1. Frank Viviano, *Soccer More than a Game to Italy Right*, S.F. CHRON., Dec. 16, 1994, at A1.

2. *Id.*

European countries with ever-increasing regularity.³ A rise in the popularity of these groups has been accompanied by an increase in xenophobic and racist incidents in Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland.⁴

In Belgium, the openly-racist Flemish nationalist party, Vlaams Blok, has enjoyed success at the polls and increased popular support under the guidance of its youthful (thirty-two-year-old) leader, Filip Dewinter.⁵ Vlaams Blok's success is generally attributed to the party's central platform of immigrant repatriation.⁶ The party has focused on rising unemployment and crime and the public's historic acceptance of immigrants as the cause of such problems.⁷ Decrying the large number of alleged illegal immigrants in Belgium, Dewinter has suggested that non-Europeans be specially schooled in order to "re-familiarize" them with their home countries and prepare them for deportation.⁸ The Vlaams Blok platform also includes proposals for a separatist Flemish state, anti-abortion measures, and resistance to the Americanization of Flemish culture.⁹

Immigration proved to be a hot issue in France's recent presidential election. President Jacques Chirac emerged victorious from the election amidst a fury of anti-immigration campaigning on the front lines of the presidential race. During his candidacy, Philippe de Villiers warned the French electorate of the rising tide of Algerian immigrants resulting from the Algerian civil war and the many social problems allegedly caused by immigration.¹⁰ Jean-Marie Le Pen, well-known leader of France's extreme-right National Front Party, also made a bid for the presidency. Le Pen made waves in early 1995 by launching his presidential candidacy with a vow to bring the guillotine back to France and deport millions of immigrants.¹¹

3. *Id.*

4. Thalif Deen, *Human Rights: U.N. Spotlights Xenophobia in the West*, Inter Press Serv., Dec. 15, 1994, available in LEXIS, News Library, WIRES File.

5. Jeremy Langdon, *Threat to Britain from New Tide of Neo-Nazi Menace*, EVENING STANDARD, Jan. 10, 1995, at 24, available in LEXIS, News Library, CURNWS File.

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

10. John Ridding, *Dark Horse in French Race for Presidency: Philippe de Villiers is Certain to Widen Splits on the Political Right*, FIN. TIMES, Jan. 10, 1995, at 2, available in LEXIS, News Library, CURNWS File.

11. *Le Pen to Kick Out Immigrants if President*, Reuter Eur. Community Rep., Jan. 16, 1995, available in LEXIS, News Library, WIRES File.

Similarly, in Austria, immigration has dominated the political agenda of the far-right. Right-wing leader Joerg Haider has made an issue of the anti-immigrant policies adopted by Austria's European neighbors, suggesting that Austria should take a tougher stance in dealing with its illegal immigrant population.¹² Among Haider's proposals to oust Austria's illegal immigrants are routine identity checks, more detention facilities, and special deportation flights.¹³ Italy, meanwhile, has seen a rash of attacks upon foreigners, as the increasing tide of immigrants has stirred wide-spread resentment.¹⁴ While civil rights groups and the Vatican have condemned these attacks, the national government, which includes ministers from far-right political parties, has proposed to curb immigration.¹⁵ Historically, Italy has had no firm immigration policy, with only stop-gap governmental measures available to deal with "emergency" situations.¹⁶ Recent legislative proposals call for tighter border controls, increased policing of Italy's extensive coastline, immediate deportation of illegal immigrants, and issuance of magnetic identification cards to foreign workers.¹⁷

Switzerland has passed similar legislation. Unable to tolerate illegal immigrants and increasing levels of crime, the Swiss electorate gave its overwhelming approval to expand police powers in the country's war against drugs.¹⁸ Although the Swiss government's stated reason for the legislation was to curtail the illegal drug trade, it has been accused of promoting racism.¹⁹ One criticism of the new legislation is that it allows authorities to detain illegal immigrants for up to a year before expelling them for illegal drug activity.²⁰ Critics claim the legislation curtails the rights of illegal foreign workers and is open to excessive abuse by police authorities.²¹

12. Steve Pagani, *Austria Far-Right Demands Action on Immigrants*, Reuters N. Am. Wire, Dec. 7, 1994, available in LEXIS, News Library, WIRES File.

13. *Id.*

14. John Tagliabue, *A Land of Emigrants Turns Vengeful on Immigrants*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., Jan. 6, 1995, available in LEXIS, News Library, CURNWS File.

15. *Id.*

16. *Id.*

17. Vera Haller, *Italy's Government Preparing Tough Immigration Laws*, Reuter Eur. Community Rep., Nov. 29, 1994, available in LEXIS, News Library, WIRES File.

18. Edward Luce, *Swiss Vote to Jail Illegal Incomers*, THE GUARDIAN (Manchester, Eng.), Dec. 5, 1994, at 11.

19. Edward Luce, *Swiss War on Balkan Drug Gangs 'Hits Immigrants'*, THE GUARDIAN (Manchester, Eng.), Dec. 3, 1994, at 14.

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

In no other country are the politics of immigration more tumultuous than in Germany. In 1993, German asylum laws were amended to deny refugee status to anyone arriving in Germany via a "safe third country," and reclassified the number of countries in which political persecution by the state is recognized.²² As a result, the number of asylum applications to Germany has plummeted, and even then, only a small fraction of those submitted are granted.²³ The German government's anti-immigration stance has been effective in drawing support away from right-wing parties that had been successful in raising immigration as a political issue. Additionally, Germany's ruling parties have compromised on laws granting restricted citizenship rights to third-generation immigrant children, provided that at least one parent was born in Germany and that both parents had lived there for at least ten years previous.²⁴ These developments have been met with mixed reactions from ethnic and immigrant groups.²⁵

III. NORTH AMERICA

Historically, the United States and Canada have been much more tolerant of immigration than their European counterparts, and this sentiment continues to be strong today. Nevertheless, issues surrounding each government's immigration policies are at the forefront of its respective political landscape.

The government of the United States is primarily concerned with illegal immigration from its southern neighbors. The voters of California passed Proposition 187 in the November 1994 election, thereby denying public education and health benefits to illegal immigrants.²⁶ While the Proposition itself faces certain constitutional attack, national political parties and candidates are divided over the issue of how best to cope with the nation's

22. Rick Atkinson, *In Germany, Refugee Flood Ebbs as Bonn Slams Door*, INT'L HERALD TRIB., Nov. 16, 1994, available in LEXIS, News Library, CURNWS File. A "safe third country" under German law is any country in which state-sponsored political persecution is deemed not to exist. *Id.* The fact that each of Germany's 9 contiguous neighbors qualify as such underscores the effect that this new set of asylum laws has had upon the decreasing number of applications for asylum and refugee status. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

24. Anna Tomforde, *Kohl's Partners in Brave Show of Unity*, THE GUARDIAN (Manchester, Eng.), Nov. 15, 1994, at 10.

25. *Turkish Envoy Welcomes German Citizenship Plan*, Reuters World Serv., Nov. 15, 1994, available in LEXIS, News Library, WIRES File.

26. *Republican Sparring over Immigration Begins*, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, Nov. 21, 1994, available in LEXIS, News Library, WIRES File.

illegal immigration problems.²⁷ The issue will certainly remain in the political hotseat through the 1996 presidential election.²⁸

Likewise, Canada has recently focussed much attention on its immigration policies. While recognizing that a healthy flow of immigration has contributed much to Canada's economic growth, the Canadian government is nevertheless wary of the impact that its immigration numbers and selection procedures will have on the country.²⁹ Current government proposals seek to cut immigration by 50,000 from 250,000 for 1995, while ultimately setting its immigration level at one percent of the total population in the long run.³⁰ These proposals also seek to reclassify various immigration categories,³¹ distinguish between certain immigration programs,³² replace cabinet-appointed immigration officials with public servants, and change the law so that children born in Canada to refugee-claimant parents may not automatically be considered Canadian citizens, as the law currently holds.³³

IV. CONCLUSION

Immigration has proved to be a key issue in the politics of the world's Western democracies. The matters discussed above illustrate the complexities facing each respective government. The current overall trend is, however, toward increasing reluctance to accept immigrants. The emphasis of many laws, political platforms, and proposed policies in these countries seek to close the door to foreigners, primarily as a reaction to the social fragmentation, crime, and economic harm often associated with immigrants. Presently, no reversal to this trend is in sight.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.*

29. Allan Thompson, *Cut Immigrants by 50,000 by 1995*, THE GAZETTE (Montreal), Sept. 16, 1994, at B1, available in LEXIS, News Library, CURNWS File.

30. *Id.*

31. Among the immigrant categories proposed to be reclassified is the "family" class of immigrants. *Id.* The "family" classification is now quite broad, essentially including any direct relative (e.g. spouse, children, parents, grandparents) of a Canadian citizen or landed immigrant. *Id.* Under the new proposal, only spouses and children would qualify under the "family" classification, with other relatives required to meet stricter standards for acceptance. *Id.*

32. For example focussing on differences between the refugee program and the immigration program. *Id.*

33. *Id.*

