

The Anti-EU and Anti-Immigration Fixation: expedient politics?

by rpinto_anglodeutsch - Sunday, December 14, 2014

<http://anglodeutsch.eu/anti-eu-anti-immigration-fixation/>

This post, the first of a series of the AngloDeutsch™ Blog, focuses on the rise of anti-immigration and anti-EU and/or Euro discourse in Britain and Germany, with a focus on the role being played by both the mainstream and the populist parties such as UK Independence Party (Ukip) in Britain and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany. It argues that there is a need for a more measured approach, especially in Britain, rather than simplistic analysis which may be politically convenient but serves only to fan the flames of populist fires.

Growing Anti-immigration and Anti-Euro Sentiment in Germany

The increasingly heated immigration debate reached Germany about the same time as it started in the United Kingdom (UK). Mr Thilo Sarrazin published a book called "Germany is doing away with itself" in 2010, which incidentally became the most popular book on politics by a German-language author in a decade. Its central argument was that Germany's post-war immigration policy has failed, thus catalysing an intense and raucous nation-wide debate about the costs and benefits of multiculturalism. Mr Sarrazin advocated a more restrictive immigration policy (except for the highly skilled) and reduction of state welfare benefits, while making strong statements about Islam and the Turkish and Arab communities. Mr Sarrazin did not shy away from predicting the Germans will eventually be outnumbered by an underclass of Muslims (see below for echoes of Enoch Powell's views). The popularity of the book (over 1.5 million copies sold) and various surveys illustrated that his arguments struck a chord in the country, especially with male, middle-class, middle-aged and elderly, conservatives.

The book broke an unwritten rule in Germany by discussing migration, ethnicity and Islam so openly and some might say provocatively. Germans have typically trodden lightly on such topics for obvious historical reasons. The debate even affected the leading conservative sister parties, namely the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) and the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU). The Chancellor Angela Merkel, well-known for being Europe's most accomplished politician at saying nothing that might upset anyone, even felt sufficiently emboldened to make one of her few unequivocal statements. In 2010 she stated that multiculturalism had "utterly failed" in the country. Despite concerns that it might happen, the furore of 2010 did not result in an anticipated new party to capitalise on the issue. Mr Sarrazin moved on other challenges, publishing another controversial book called "Europe doesn't need the euro" in 2012, which once again went against the grain of national of public discourse.

Perhaps in recognition of its political value in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, the salience of the immigration debate has been increasing very fast in Germany. The CSU has been focusing on "poverty immigrants" and "benefit tourists" since 2013, causing German politicians to discuss new instruments designed to keep mainly Roma immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria out as far as possible. Last week, the CSU published a policy paper insisting that German should be spoken both in public and at home. The paper made a distinction between EU and non-EU immigrants; the requirement would apply only to the latter, not the former. There was widespread condemnation in the media that it is not for the state to

determine which language people, immigrants or otherwise, choose to speak in their own homes.

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) initially had a very narrower focus, namely leaving the Euro (not the EU, which currently no party currently advocates). It is not by coincidence that it started gaining much greater traction with voters when it began to broaden its policies. Like Ukip, it has brought its guns to bear on the EU (the principle of subsidiarity, rather than exiting the EU) and immigration issues (asylum, immigration law on the Canadian model, etc.). Although this may change, for the moment, neither politicians nor the media discuss the issues in quite the same strident manner as in Britain.

Immigration and EU Scepticism in British Politics

By contrast, in the UK the meteoric rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), founded in 1993 and led by their jovial, pint-guzzling, fag-smoking Mr Nigel Farage, who like Mr Sarrazin does not mince his words in relation to immigration or the EU, has been remarkable. Under his leadership, UKIP's star has been on an apparently inexorable rise, which unlike the German situation so far, is having dramatic consequences on Britain and potentially the EU. Whereas in April 2006 the Prime Minister David Cameron felt able to describe UKIP members as being "fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists, mostly." By 2013, its popularity and organisational capacity has increased so much that in the county council elections across England, Ukip polled an average of 23% in the wards where it stood and returned 147 elected councillors. Its biggest success was getting its first two Members of Parliament elected in Clacton and Rochester and Strood in late 2014.

Ukip has rapidly risen to prominence at the expense of a hemorrhaging of voters away principally from the Conservatives, but also from Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Its principal policy is simple but appealing, namely to withdraw from the EU and agree a free trade agreement instead. However, like the AfD it is no longer a single issue party. Ukip extols loudly and repeatedly the virtues of limited, controlled immigration and its intention to "take back control of the UK borders". Work permits will be permitted to fill skills gaps in the UK jobs market so long as immigrants have a job to go to, speak English and have accommodation and health insurance. Immigrants will only be eligible for benefits (in work or out of work) when they have been paying tax and National Insurance for five years and will only be eligible for permanent residence after ten years.

The intention is clearly to slow down migration to "manageable" levels. Recent figures had shown a steep decline in net migration until 2014 (the subject of a forthcoming post), when they peaked once again, probably connected with a surge in Bulgarian and Romanian immigration now that the transition period is over. Ukip has coupled the anti-EU and anti-immigrant debate to remarkable effect. This double-pronged weapon is paying rich political dividends for them. However, as with many populist initiatives, while they may be superficially appealing, they would amount to a double-whammy with major long-term consequences if enacted by Britain. The fact is that there is a lot of political smoke and mirrors in the debate. The problems in Britain are long-standing and while they may well have been accentuated by immigration and the freedom of movement (though the jury is out on these), to conclude that the solution is to leave the EU in order to regain control of the borders is simply not credible.

The Ukip tail wagging the bulldog

In the UK, the “kippers” are having a dramatic effect, resulting in an increasing clamour in relation to the issue of immigration. Ukip has effectively manoeuvred the Conservative Party (along with its well-known and long-established Eurosceptic wing) into offering, should they still be in power in 2017, a straight in-out referendum as to whether to remain within the EU or not. Furthermore, it has managed to push the Government, Liberal Democrats included, into a mooted renegotiation of the UK’s membership terms with the EU, including significant reform so as to repatriate powers to the nation-state. Most EU countries share a concern about the abuse of the subsidiarity principle and are inclined to be supportive, not least Germany. But the increasingly shrill nature of the UK position is making such reform harder to secure. Recent demands to abolish the principle of freedom of movement of workers were dismissed out of hand by the President of the European Commission, Mr Jean-Claude Juncker, as well as the key German politicians such as Mr Wolfgang Schäuble (unthinkable) and Mrs Angela Merkel (no tempering with the principle). The spat over the refusal to pay “anywhere near the amount requested by Brussels by December” appears to be little more than political bluster and posturing.

Also, the casual observer would be tempted to conclude that the immigration debate is increasingly histrionic in Britain. Seemingly every other day, the heat is turned up and the rhetoric becomes ever more intemperate. Mainstream politicians on all sides of the political spectrum, with the notable exception of the LibDems, have taken up the UKIP mantra of anti-EU sentiment combined with anti-immigrant rhetoric. This has become a normal part of the public discourse in the Houses of Parliament, on TV, radio and newspapers. It is hardly surprising that the public feels emboldened to express its views in an increasingly no-holds barred manner, verging on racism and xenophobia. Such discourse might well happen behind closed doors in other European countries but it not (yet) so open.

It is also not by chance that the escalation in immigration and anti-EU rhetoric in Britain has coincided with the recent bye-elections which the Conservative party has lost to Ukip in Clacton and Rochester and Strood. As the Ukip ratings went up, Ministers started banging on about the necessity to get rid of the EU’s freedom of movement principle, the PM refused to pay the additional EU tax which his government has agreed, etc. This smacks of short-term electioneering. However, a red line was crossed when the Defence Minister, Mr Michael Fallon claimed that certain towns are being “swamped” by immigrants and their residents are “under siege”. The Prime Minister’s Office reworded “swamped” with “under pressure” but the boat had already left the harbour. The escalation of emotive language being used by Government ministers is a clear trend that the rest of society takes its cue from.

This is nothing new in Britain. In 1978, Mrs Margaret Thatcher stated that large numbers of migrant workers and foreigners (from the new Commonwealth and Pakistan) meant that people were afraid that the country might be rather swamped by people of a different culture. This even before referring to Enoch Powell’s so-called “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968 which is credited, at least in part, with playing a contributory role in the unexpected 1970 Conservative general election win.

While such political (and media) rhetoric is hardly new in British politics, it does mark a major new departure in the UK where the Government itself (and to some extent the Labour Party) seems to have lost a sense of moderation in relation to the political discourse on immigration and the EU. I expect this trend to intensify in the months until the General Election in May 2015.

If Ukip (and similar parties of its ilk) is indeed the driving force that is dominating the political discourse on the EU and immigration, this is bad news indeed for immigrants, for the EU and for Britain itself. By

comparison the German President, Mr Joachim Gauck, frequently stressed the importance of solidarity vis-à-vis asylum seekers, stressing the virtues of immigration and integration. The German Government is paving the way for tightened asylum seeker law but also a more flexible Dual Citizenship law and strongly defending the principle of freedom of movement of people within the EU as being non-negotiable. At a recent immigration and integration event in November 2014 organised at the Headquarters of the CDU, something that would not be imaginable by the leading political parties in Britain, the Chancellor Mrs Angela Merkel stressed that "Germany has the chance to become a great integration country" and that "Islam now belongs to us." The contrast in the political rhetoric could not be greater for countries that have more or less identical foreign-born as a percentage of the total population (12.3% and 12.4% in Britain and Germany respectively).

Austerity accentuates long standing problems

The omens are not good for the future of immigration and the EU; both are increasingly conflated and damned, especially in Britain. Ukip appears to have cornered the market of British political discourse and the Conservatives (and to a lesser extent Labour) are increasingly dancing to their tune, so as to avoid losing touch with an important segment of voters who are clearly experiencing a strong allure to these simplistic yet appealing overtures. Politicians of all hues and shades are increasingly latching on to this sentiment. The trend is reinforced by the apparent readiness of a notable portion of the media to sing along to these tunes in Britain, especially in relation to the anti-EU discourse. Without doubt increasing stresses and strains are evident in housing, education, health, transportation, etc. but these are long-term and systemic in nature. They have been greatly accentuated by the recent years of austerity, a process which is set to continue in Britain directly through government policies and indirectly in Germany through long-term wage restraint. They are not the consequence of a surge in net migration over several years caused by the EU and its freedom of movement principle. The discourse stressing these two elements at the exclusion of everything else cannot be left unchallenged.

In the next few posts I shall explore various migration themes and issues, from the perspective of Britain, Germany and the EU. I hope to contribute to a debate about this increasingly important topic before moving on to other issues such as the housing crisis and the future of the EU.

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