Chris Mullin: far right is driving Europe back to dark age

Migrants on the German military ship Rhein. Photograph: Alfonso Di Vincenzo/Kontrolab/LightRocket via Getty Images

'Go Back to Where you Came From' analyses the problem well but has few solutions

As the Syrian refugee crisis spread across Europe in autumn 2015 the leader of a Dutch far-right party, Geert Wilders, warned of an Islamic invasion – "an invasion which threatens our prosperity, our security, our culture and identity". He was not alone, all over Europe – even in traditional liberal democracies such as Holland and Denmark – white populist politicians have cynically exploited economic crisis and the migrant influx for their own political ends and have been rewarded with levels of support unprecedented since before the last world war.

Austria came within a whisker of electing a far-right president. In the recent French presidential election the National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, took second place. Even in Germany, where the weight of history hangs heavily, a white nationalist party recently took 13 per cent of the vote and now has more than 90 seats in the Bundestag. In the UK, despite the implosion of Ukip, globalisation and migration have led to impending British withdrawal from the European Union. And in the United States similar forces have led to the election of a narcissist who, like hardline nationalists everywhere, trades on fear and prejudice. As the author says, political views and parties that were once peripheral are now mainstream. How has this happened?

Actually the causes are not hard to divine. Globalisation has led to the disappearance of many traditional working-class jobs in the general direction of China and India, and in many areas they have been replaced by low-skilled, minimum-wage jobs, rising levels of unemployment and a growing sense of alienation. Unsurprisingly the victims of this process are looking for someone to blame for their plight and inevitably their attention has been directed to the growing number of foreigners in our midst. In the US the Mexicans get the blame.

In Europe it is the rising tide of migration from eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa that has fanned the flames. This, combined with a widespread feeling that the liberal elites who have personally benefited from globalisation, who do not live in the ghettoes and whose livelihoods and culture are not threatened by mass migration, are indifferent to the feelings of the have-nots. Recent outbreaks of Islamist terrorism have only exacerbated the situation.

Germ of truth

Sasha Polakow-Suransky, a former op-ed editor at the New York Times, has painstakingly documented this phenomenon. He has interviewed populist politicians across northern Europe and engages with their arguments. Although inevitably they attract a fascist fringe, many are not crude nationalists, their arguments are often sophisticated and contain a germ of truth. Some started on the left and have moved steadily to the right. Likewise many of their voters switched directly from left to right without passing through any middle ground.

The author's conclusion, however, is uncompromising. "Far right leaders are correct that immigration creates problems; what they miss are that they are the primary problem." He goes on, "The greatest threat to liberal democracies comes not from immigrants and refugees, but from the backlash against them by those on the inside who exploit the fear of outsiders to chip away at the values and institutions that make our societies liberal. By attempting to deal with the challenges of immigration by publicly denouncing judges, casting aside constitutional protections of minority groups and stripping some citizens of their nationality, many of the world's most advanced democracies are hitting the self-destruct button rather than take on new passengers."

I don't entirely buy this. Given that the author concedes, albeit quietly, that mass migration is a problem, one might reasonably have expected that he would have something to say about how we got to where we are today and what is to be done. He might, for example, have pointed out that it was a serious mistake for Angela Merkel, who is in many respects an outstanding leader, to say at the height of the refugee crisis that Germany would take all comers. Likewise it was a mistake for Tony Blair's government, when the EU absorbed east European countries, to waive Britain's right to a moratorium on free movement on the basis of predictions about the likely flow of migrants that proved to be utterly wrong.

Hard questions unanswered

Nor is it sensible for the EU to treat all arriving migrants as potential refugees from persecution when they openly admit that their motivation is economic. After the fall of the tyranny in Tunisia, for example, the first thing that happened was that thousands of young men got on small boats and sailed to southern Italy. What ought to have happened is that they should have been given a decent meal and a bed for the night and then sent home. Instead they were asked if they wanted to claim political asylum and allowed to melt away into the hinterland. Ditto for most of those coming from most of west Africa, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Even in the case of Syria, we should be taking only UN-certified refugees directly from the camps, not simply those with the means to pay people smugglers to get them into Europe.

We should be in no doubt as to the seriousness of the crisis. The collapse (aided by the West) of viable government in Libya has opened up a massive backdoor into Europe, which needs to be closed as soon as possible. Population movements on this scale have the capacity to bring down governments. Italy and Greece, which are bearing the brunt of the crisis, are receiving precious little help from the rest of the EU. The overall effect is driving European politics back towards a dark age. The author has accurately analysed the problem, but has dodged suggesting answers to some of the difficult questions that inevitably arise.

Chris Mullin is a former UK Labour minister. His autobiography, Hinterland, was recently published in paperback.

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