**Politics and immigration**

**Is there a shift to the political right?**

**Introduction**

The changing face of politics in England is fairly obvious to anyone who takes a serious interest in public policy and politics. The recent by election in Eastleigh offered an insight into the changes that are happening all round us. The specific element we need to take note of was the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) candidate taking second place behind the Liberal Democrat candidate who won the seat.

The second place was markedly different to the by election in Barnsley where the UKIP candidate again took second place but with more than 9,000 less votes than the winning candidate. The Eastleigh by election had a much smaller margin and points to the possibility of a UKIP Member of Parliament.

I have started this paper with UKIP because I believe that they are representative of a growing *new right* perspective in English politics. This is highlighted by the Prime Minister making increasingly bellicose noises about the need to restrict the number of Bulgarians and Romanians entering the UK when these countries join the European Union.

In a blog on the Social Europe Journal published on April 4th John Weeks published the following:

*“The anti-immigrant statements of the Prime Minister follow on the recent strong electoral performance of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which has positioned itself well to the right of the Conservatives (leaving it very far to the right, indeed.) The inflammatory and irresponsible polemics by the Prime Minister are all the more dangerous because of a clear increase in such prejudice in the public. My cottage in rural Hampshire is positioned in the heartland of troglodyte Tory-ism, and I frequently encounter assertions that Romanians, Poles, etc are responsible for local unemployment, housing shortages and any other social malady that strikes the speaker.”*

Up until recently the far right in England has been associated with the British National Party (BNP) and more recently the English Democrats and on occasion any number of fringe groups with a very small number of followers. These groups have also been associated with a fascist ideology that is easy to decry and condemn.

In a different context the arguments about the appointment of new coach by Sunderland Football Club, Paulo Di Canio who in the past had claimed to be a fascist, the outcry against his appointment led to his claiming that this was no longer the case, whilst expressing himself surprised that it was an issue in the context of football.

The issue to note is that in a joined up society no cultural activity including football can be separated from the building up of a just society. It feels that the debate is similar to those who would exclude the Church from public discourse.

I’ve focused on the issue of fascism because I believe because it is important that we make the connection between the specific ideology of fascism and the shift in political thinking to the Right. There is a difference between the two ideologies but we cannot escape that there is an overlap in the discussion of issues such as immigration.

The BNP being overly crude in their approach with the connotations of violence puts off a more middle class voter whilst UKIP is seen to be respectable. The commitment of the EDL to supporting UKIP in the local elections offers an interesting insight into the wider debate about far right politics.

The fact that UKIP is not a fascist political party does not detract from the fact that it espouses political opinions that are attractive to those who want to be able to vote for a legitimate right wing party.

In a recently published report ‘*From voting to violence? Far right extremism in Britain’* the following is stated:

*“UKIP appears to be appealing more strongly to professionals, managers and citizens in non-routine employment, who read broadsheets or tabloids. Interestingly, clear majorities of these supporters say they are non religious.”*

The report goes on to analyse attitudes to violence by adherents of the far right and whilst this is important it is not entirely relevant to this paper.

**Moving to the political right**

The key political policies of UKIP according to reports in the media would seem to be focused on a withdrawal from the European Union and it was in fact formed to oppose European integration the report quoted above offers an important insight:

*“By 2010, and like the BNP, UKIP was offering a combination of nationalist, xenophobic, Euro sceptic and populists policies. Similar to radical right parties on the continent UKIP demanded that the British end mass and ‘uncontrolled immigration’, though unlike the BNP it proposed a five-year freeze. In addition, there were pledges to regain border control, expel illegal immigrants, remove benefits for remaining immigrants, repeal the Human Rights Act and end the active promotion of the doctrine of multiculturalism by local and national government and publicly funded bodies.”*

It is clear that the rise of UKIP with a commitment to policies that might best be described as being anti immigrant offers a challenge to those of us who have a vision for the common good that encapsulates the integration of immigrants.

The challenge of UKIP to the Conservative Party is well documented and the recent speeches by the Prime Minister are a sign that he want to appeal to the constituency that might vote for UKIP. The most recent argument that we must exclude Bulgarians and Romanians is I believe the tip of a very large iceberg. Like wise the argument that new immigrants must be excluded from social housing seems to have a false ring when we realise that there is a shortage of such accommodation and very long waiting lists.

The populist nature of the policies may have an appeal to politicians who want to be seen to be protecting the status quo of some kind of Englishness but this must be set aside the potential for long term problems. The promotion of such populist policies could lead to ill thought out responses to individuals and groups who are not British that would be acceptable in the light of political comments.

The problem we face is that the strident comments are coming from across the political spectrum in an editorial in the Observer on Sunday March 31st the point was made that Yvette Cooper had apologised for Labour’s failure to restrict low-skilled labour from eastern Europe and proposed restrictions to welfare benefits for new European immigrants.

In December Ed Miliband insisted that all immigrants should learn English in a “connected society”. Add to this the proposal from the coalition that teachers identify the children of illegal immigrants in their classrooms.

It seems that the immigrant is under attack on all political fronts and the traditional approach of not making immigration a political issue is no longer acceptable. A key element of this debate is the belief that the new immigrant is seeking work and is therefore an economic migrant. Equally there are those who believe that there are those who want to draw UK State benefits or make use of the NHS.

The Spectator of April 5th 2013 published an article with the title ‘International Health Service’. The writer J. Merion Thomas a cancer specialist in the NHS argued that following an earlier article that he had received letters with example what are described as overseas health tourists. The significance of this article is that it feeds into the anecdotal evidence that is so often quoted to prove that services are under threat.

To add to the debate last week David Goodhart published ‘The British Dream’ Successes and failures of Post War Immigration’ an academic study of immigration and integration which focuses the challenge of integration from the perspective of what can be described as the liberal left.

It is of course important not to dismiss the arguments of Goodhart who is seeking to promote a better understanding of why some immigrant communities do not thrive in UK society. In parts of the North of England the reality is that ethnic groups do congregate in the same areas and there may be fewer opportunities for cross cultural integration.

The challenge we face is to work with immigrants to find their place within British society, this is of course of particular importance for refugees who in many cases are here for reasons other than economics.

Likewise it is important that in seeking to support refugees that we offer them an understanding of our society that is based on the building up of the common good where everyone finds an equal place in an accepting society.

The political rhetoric of the present time is both counter productive and potentially harmful because it could set community against community. The argument for a more coherent debate was summed up in the editorial in the Observer referred to above which states that:

*“More facts, but also a strategy on immigration that has greater coherence and efficiency is required. One that identifies barriers to integration and sets about dismantling them with alacrity. In 1997, net immigration totalled 50,000 a year, with more people leaving the country than taking up residence. In 2010 the figure for new immigrants had climbed to 255,000 that year. In addition, the UK Border Agency, soon to be axed, has for years been in a mess, leaving many immigrants in limbo and other here illegally. For some working class communities the change in their neighbourhoods has been significant, both positively but also negatively when their cultural separatism prevails.”*

The current debate is problematic because it reinforces the arguments of the far right that immigration is a problem and that we need to create what amounts to a fortress mentality.

The truly vicious approach of the BNP is tempered by what seems to be a more temperate approach of the mainstream political parties that now includes UKIP. The fact that what is perceived to be temperate is actually a hard line position that reinforces the view that immigration is out of control. Add to this argument the perspective that in many neighbourhoods there is a lack of integration of immigrant communities and we have a recipe for increased xenophobia. (Eg The British Dream David Goodhart)

In considering the issues under review it is important that we take note of the comment that ‘London is a nation within a nation’. The idea that because of its economic base and wide ranging cultural diversity that in London the issues associated with immigration and other social policy issues can be seen to be different to other parts of the country.

**The Churches contribution**

The work of the Churches over the past 25 years with refugees and asylum seekers in particular has in many ways been exemplary. Many Day Centres and other projects have been developed by local Christians and others working to ensure that support systems are in place to offer advice and every other type of support. Sadly due to cuts in funding (of small amounts of money) this work is under constant threat.

In addition Church Leaders have taken an active role in challenging iniquitous policies from government of all shades. It is important that this specific contribution is maintained and in particular that the challenge of new right political ideology is challenged. No matter which political party is falling into the trap of raising the temperature on immigration issues.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the theological understanding of the importance of hospitality for the stranger. The Jewish law is clear on the importance of treating the immigrant with equity not the least because of the people had themselves been strangers seeking a place to settle. In Psalm 146 the Psalmist says:

*“The Lord restores sight to the blind*

*And raises those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous*

*And protects the stranger in the land”*

The Old Testament does of course have examples where the principles are denied and the stranger and immigrant is treated in a way that is contrary to the Law.

The New Testament builds on the equitable approach and Jesus in the Parable of the judgement of the nations Matthew 25 reminds his listeners that:

*“When I was a stranger you took me into your home”* vs 35b

It is important to remember that it is Jesus who in this text is the stranger and is speaking for all those who come after who need to be given the space to rebuild their lives. Like wise the author of the Epistle to the Ephesians writes in Chapter 2 Verse 19:

*“Thus you are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but ‘fellow-citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household.”*

In his Encyclical *Caritas in veritate, 62* Pope Benedict XV1 writes:

*Migration....is a striking phenomenon because of the sheer numbers of people involved, the social, economic, political, cultural and religious problems it raised... (We) are facing a social phenomenon of epoch-making proportions that requires bold, forward-looking policies of international cooperation... We are all witnesses of the burden of suffering, the dislocation and the aspirations that accompany the flow of migrants.... (T)hese labourers cannot be considered a commodity or a mere workforce. They must not, therefore, be treated like any other factor of production. Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.”*

Quoted in Xenophilia or Xenophobia Towards a Theology of Migration

Luis N. Rivera-Pagan

The Ecumenical review December 2012

The message of *Caritas in veritate* is one that challenges all those politicians and others who would like to shift the political debate towards a harder line on migration.

The issues surrounding migration are complex and multi faceted and will be discussed at the tenth assembly of the World Council of Churches when it meets in Busan Republic of Korea between 0ctober 30th and November 8th 2013. It is important that any British delegates are well briefed on the importance of the issues from both a theological and policy perspective,

**Conclusion**

I have tried in this paper to explore what I believe to be a shift to a politically right wing perspective on issues of migration and migrants in the United Kingdom. The challenge Christians face is to argue for the understanding that we are committed to building an equitable society that is rooted in an understanding of the common good.

The problems we face in working to change attitudes cannot be underestimated, the popular press will make scapegoats of migrants and politicians seem to be working to the lowest common denominator in the argument.

The fact that the migrant and stranger is an easy target is a reminder that we start from a Christian understanding that is based on the equality of humanity and this demands that we continue to work together for a recognition of this fact by thinking people.

Terry Drummond

Bishop of Southwark’s Adviser on Urban and Public Policy

terry.drummond@southwark.anglican.org

08 April 2013

Paper for London Churches Refugee Network April 10th 2013