

The Claude Moraes Column

View from Europe, October 2002

The Far Right Aim for the Mainstream.

For several months earlier this year it seemed as though the far-right were on the march in a significant number of European countries. The huge publicity which accompanied the second round Presidential breakthrough of Le Pen in France and the assassination of Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands continued a media feeding frenzy which began some time before with the formation of a far-right coalition in Austria after the success of SS sympathiser Jorg Haider.

Yet the media seem to have lost interest. So what exactly has happened since then – has there been a lasting impact, and what should be our response on the centre left.

The answer lies in a word we should use more often – “mainstreaming”. Far-right, openly racist parties are no so much marching, as “mainstreaming”. Working in a range of different ways to influence the mainstream direction of the major political parties in some EU countries.

In the European Parliament this was brought home to me when a Dutch Socialist colleague complained that in his country everything had changed in some way. A country known throughout the world for its liberal values. Now has a Conservative/List Fortuyn coalition government. In Dutch terms, the centre left was almost wiped out. The tone set by the late Pim Fortuyn – that Islam is a “backward culture” is now translating into intolerant policies towards the concentrated Muslim communities in Rotterdam and elsewhere. One recently involved a “census” of Dutch Muslims and their behaviour.

The idea of relatively extreme policies being introduced through otherwise respectable coalition government in Europe is seen in the way Denmark one of Europe’s most liberal, open societies is buying into policies unseen since the late 1930s. An exaggeration? Recently the UK-based Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre writing in the Guardian described how Denmark’s Liberal/Conservative coalition government which is supported by the far-right Danish People’s Party “was taking steps which will turn one of the worlds most liberal countries into a bastion of intolerant nationalism”. While there is no “final solution” looming in Copenhagen there is the creation of new policies introducing legalised discrimination.

The Danish Parliament passed a law which prevents anyone under the age of 24 from living in Denmark with a non-EU spouse. It also prevents asylum seekers from marrying while their applications are being processed. The law’s unspoken rationale was to deter arranged marriage between Denmark’s Muslim community and people in Islamic countries. Legislation making this explicit would invariably be struck down so the Danish government have chosen equal discrimination against all foreigners.

What does this tell us about the way the far-right agenda operates in Europe. The debate on the left is one of real concern at the development above, but it often operates around a discussion about whether the “threat” from the far-right is in some way exaggerated. This was the case when Le Pen made his breakthrough in the second round of the French Presidential elections. The symbolism of this sent shockwaves through Europe, yet his percentage vote was only slightly above his last presidential total.

There is confusion in the debate. History doesn’t in fact repeat itself. It mutates and comes back in different forms, with a different appearance and different consequences for different minorities.

While there was a chorus of EU disapproval after the first electoral advance of Jorg Haider in Austria, the emergence of hard right policies from Pia Kjaersgaard’s Danish Peoples Party has been met with embarrassed silence.

There are obvious common denominators to the many new far-right movements across Europe – immigration and Islamophobia feature in the five or six issues which constantly emerge.

In the “big” EU players France and Italy, and it’s smaller players, Belgium, Portugal, Austria, Netherlands and Denmark, the far-right hold power locally and have signalled that they are here to stay. In the country where I spend much of my working life Belgium’s Vlaams Blok won a third of the vote in one of the country’s municipal elections on a manifesto to close mosques and “end” immigration.

The far-right in the EU do not quite wear jack boots nor is their influence exaggerated by the left. Instead their ideas and political power is entering the mainstream. The left in Europe now has the challenge of how to deal with this more sophisticated threat.