

# **Immigration, Asylum and Extremist Politics - Europe and Australia**

**JAMES JUPP**

*Australian National University*

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**Abstract:** The States of Europe and Australasia share democratic institutions and political party traditions in many respects. They also share a concern with influxes of immigrants and refugees which are changing the ethnic composition of what were previously regarded as 'nation states'. However there are considerable differences between them in their political reaction to these changes. Some European states have racist or fascist traditions which have been entrenched for many years and were previously directed against long-resident minorities. Others have been relatively homogenous and ethnic variety is a new experience. The immigration policies of the states vary, with Australia and to a lesser extent New Zealand having a long history of carefully planned and controlled intakes, designed to enhance the economy and avoid ethnic conflict. Others can scarcely be said to have immigration policies at all and see the control of entry largely in law enforcement terms. This variety is reflected in different political responses, which range all the way from mass support for anti-immigration parties at the ballot box to anti-democratic street violence. The established parties may attempt to pre-empt new movements by adopting some of their platform. Resisting this temptation is a particular dilemma for parties of the 'Left' which rely on working class support. Traditional 'left-right' divisions may become confused. However many of the new movements are very unstable and this may help to contain their impact, especially if the established parties agree to resist them.

There is a startling contrast between the Australian and the European experience of immigration and refugee flows and of ethnic relationships. While Australia has taken in over 600 000 permanent settlers on a humanitarian and refugee basis since 1945, it has never been faced with an uncontrolled rush of asylum seekers. To prevent this from happening it instituted mandatory and irrevocable detention for all undocumented arrivals in 1991 and developed this more fully in the late 1990s. All of this it has justified to the UNHCR as legitimate within the Convention on Refugees of 1951. The rest of the Australian immigration program is carefully controlled at a level of about 100 000 per annum, with net migration at about 60 000 because of permanent departures. It is very improbable that many will enter Australia without being recorded as all arrivals need a valid visa to avoid detention and probable deportation. This effective control does not prevent public hostility and even panic influencing immigration policy. But it does weaken the basis for anti-immigration extremist groups when compared with the European situation. Moreover, despite a long history of official racism, Australia does not have a fascist tradition. Until the late 1940s it was overwhelmingly colonised from the British Isles. Those of British and Irish origin still constitute 75 per cent of the population and there are no other 'ethnic groups' with more than four per cent, however generously defined. It has one of the oldest two-party systems in the world which has never been disrupted by war or revolution. Lesser parties have only rarely gained 10 per cent of the vote. Only one of these, One Nation, has been centrally concerned with immigration. It rapidly disintegrated after early success in 1998.

### **The European Contrast**

Australia has no land borders and most of its neighbours do not adhere to the UN Convention on Refugees, although Australia may still judge them to be 'safe havens' nevertheless. All members of the European Union and the Nordic Union subscribe to the Convention, to the Schengen agreement (now the Amsterdam Treaty) effective from 1995 and the Dublin Convention on asylum seekers of 1990. These require the first country of entry to take responsibility for undocumented arrivals or asylum seekers. Each state reserves the right to deal with such immigrants within the context of its national law and administration, subject to the UN Convention and to the European Convention on Human Rights. This gives considerable scope to political forces opposed to immigration and refugees to influence legislation and administration,. There is a wide discrepancy between the welfare state humanism of the Scandinavian states and the Netherlands, the reliance on the police of France or Italy or the muddled response of the United Kingdom. Most European states administer immigration through their law enforcement agencies (Ministry of Justice, Home Office, Ministry of the Interior ) and the emphasis is often on deterrence and punishment. However none of them have adopted the mandatory and irrevocable detention policy which Australia has applied to all unvisaed arrivals since 1991. Most of them allow an 'exceptional right to remain' for many who are not strictly Convention refugees, which Australia does not. Thus the flows into western Europe are unpredictable and create uncertainty and hostility which encourages opponents of all kinds of immigration and ethnic change(see **Table One**)

**TABLE ONE; Asylum Applications since 1995: Selected Industrialised States**

State	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Austria	5 919	6 991	6 719	13 805	20 096	18 284	30 135
Belgium	11 420	12 433	11 768	21 965	35 780	42 691	24 549
Denmark	5104	5893	5092	9370	12 331	12 200	12 512
Finland	854	711	973	1 272	3 106	3 170	1 651
France	20 415	17 405	21 416	22 375	30 907	38 747	47 291
Germany	127937	116 367	104 353	98 644	95 113	78 564	88 287
Greece	1 312	1 643	4 376	2 953	1 528	3 083	5 499
Ireland	424	1 179	3 883	4 626	7 724	11 096	10 325
Italy	1 732	675	1 858	11 122	33 364	15 564	9 620
N'lans	29 258	22 170	34 443	45 217	42 733	43 895	32 579
Norway	1 460	1 778	2 271	8 373	10 160	10 842	14 782
Portugal	457	270	297	365	307	224	234
Spain	5 678	4 730	4 975	6 654	8 405	7 926	9 489
Sweden	9 047	5 753	9 662	12 844	11 231	16 303	23 515
Switzerland	17 021	18 001	23 982	41 302	46 068	17 611	20 633
UK	55 000	37 000	41 500	58 487	91 200	98 900	92 000
Australia	7 632	9 758	9312	8156	9451	13 065	12 366
N.Z.	675	1 317	1 495	1 972	1 528	1 551	1 601

**Source:** UNHCR website. The DIMIA website gives different figures for Australia and elsewhere as it operates on a July to June year..

Many European states do not have coherent and planned immigration programs organised through a national ministry. This does not prevent them from having substantial immigration both legal and illegal. Often the only legal route towards permanent settlement is to apply for asylum. Two-thirds of asylum applications in the world are made to European states, with Britain recently replacing Germany as the main target. Germany now counts 12 per cent of its population as 'foreign born' despite maintaining for many years that it was not an immigration country. In the past decade the largest numbers of asylum seekers in Europe have come from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey and former Yugoslavia. With the exception of Turkey this pattern has also been repeated for the Australian humanitarian and asylum seeker intakes, although earlier influxes were mainly from Indochina and China. Orderly quotas of refugees are settled in Australia and New Zealand, Sweden, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and Finland by arrangement with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. All other refugees seek asylum, either at the border or when already within the country. The former frequently do not have a visa where required, while the latter do. To secure permanent residence they

must usually satisfy the authorities that they qualify under the specific requirements of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol.

Immigration might, thus, be divided into legal immigration for work and family reunion; refugee immigration governed by the UN Convention; asylum seekers (a majority of whom will not eventually be accepted as settlers); and those who have managed to enter a country illegally or to remain there illegally. While many extremists object to all forms of alien migration, it is the latter two categories which have provoked most recent political reaction and hostility. Between 1995 and 2000 Germany greatly reduced its intake by changes to the law, but still received 827 000; Britain received 308 000; Sweden 65 000; and Denmark 38 000. The sudden escalation of British figures from 46 000 in 1998 to 76 000 in 2000 provoked considerable public concern and media agitation. Over the same six years Australia, with a larger population than Sweden and Denmark combined, received 60 000 asylum applications. This also provoked a major political reaction and drastic changes to refugee law and practice.

All the democracies of western Europe, like Australia and New Zealand, have increased ethnic variety based on immigration. But European variety is also often long-established and complex. The history of most nation states over the past few centuries has been one of nationalising previously differing ethnic groups within their boundaries, which some groups have resisted more steadfastly than others. Australia, too, in its repression of the Indigenous peoples, and New Zealand in its compromise with the Maoris under the Waitangi treaty of 1840, have both preferred assimilation to the British-derived norm. These historic developments have produced a kaleidoscope of ethnic, religious and linguistic variety, which may be summarised as:

- Relatively monocultural with recent changes due to immigration: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Greece, Austria, France, Germany, Australia
- Officially bilingual or multilingual: United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, Finland, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, New Zealand
- Officially religiously diverse with a minority language; Netherlands.

This classification obscures much minor variety. Greece, by treaty has had to recognise the Thracian Turks; Norway, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia have indigenous minorities; Irish is a minor language in Ireland although officially equal with English; Germany by treaty recognises Schleswig Danes; Italy by treaty accepts several minor languages but not Italian dialects; France refuses to give official status to its large Breton-speaking minority; and so on. Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Australia and New Zealand are predominantly Protestant; Portugal, Austria, France, Ireland, Belgium, Spain and Italy are Catholic; Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands are divided; while Greece is Orthodox. All have Jewish communities of varying sizes and Islamic populations of recent immigrant origin which now usually outnumber the Jewish population.

There was, then, plenty of scope for ethnic disputes and compromises before the more recent influx of immigrant workers, refugees, tourists, students and illegal entrants. Anti-Semitism has a European history going back for centuries although this has been muted in Scandinavia and Australasia and has little relevance to Ireland. Historically the parties of the 'Left' have favoured liberal, multicultural or cosmopolitan policies, through this is not historically true in Australia. The parties of the 'Right' have emphasised national unity and homogeneity and the assimilation ( or in extreme cases the expulsion or decimation) of ethnic minorities. The French emphasis on common citizenship enabled the Jews to be officially emancipated two centuries ago but offers little to those wishing to preserve Breton or Islamic distinctiveness. The German insistence on 'blood-based' citizenship has only recently been relaxed under a Social Democratic government and earlier spawned the horrendous imposition of racial purity under the Nazis. Less ideologically inclined nations have all defined themselves in terms of core cultures and founding principles, including such recently established societies as Australia. These nation-building approaches have not simply been 'debates' or 'discourses' but have often involved severe repression of minorities.

### **Racist and Extremist Parties**

Most European states have effective parties based on ethnic or religious minorities as well as reactionary parties hostile to ethnic minorities and further immigration. Britain has the former but not the latter - Australia the latter but not the former. Italy, Austria, Denmark and (briefly) the Netherlands, have anti-immigration parties which are so influential that they have been admitted to government and even given the immigration ministry. France, Germany, Sweden, Spain have kept such parties from office. Britain, Ireland, Greece, Australia and New Zealand have pushed them to the margin. This variety often reflects conscious tactics rather than electoral support.

Whether a party is "extremist" may be a matter of taste. This is usually best understood within the context of the established organisations and ideologies of particular societies. For the purposes of discussion we might look for the following characteristics:

- A central emphasis on race and ethnicity in the party's appeal, which may focus on recent immigrants or have its origins in much older racist traditions;
- Frequent involvement in street violence or even 'terrorism'(bombings, killings, assassinations etc.);
- Sympathy for previous racist movements and especially for Nazism and Fascism;
- Alienation from the established parties and the system of parliamentary elections;
- Glorification of the past of the dominant ethnic group;
- Reliance on a charismatic leader

A combination of these usually characterises those parties which are marginal to electoral politics even if they contest elections. While such parties may influence the political system they are usually denounced by all major political figures relying on electoral support. Problems of definition arise

when such parties suddenly gain mass support - the “Nazi syndrome” of the early 1930s which still haunts much of Europe. Of more importance is the difficulty of distinguishing between essentially ‘racist’ parties and ‘populist’ parties. One Nation was quite clearly ‘populist’ and gained much of its support on that basis. But it also got support from small activist groups which were much closer to the European pattern. ‘Populism’ is much more potent electorally than ‘extremism’ and thus more dangerous for harmonious ethnic relations and the acceptance of immigrants and refugees.

The recent electoral success or failure of relevant parties is indicated in **Table Two**. The parties listed may be broadly conservative, but have used xenophobia actively in recent elections to enlarge their vote. Some, like the Dutch Pim Fortuyn List may not even be conservative at all but so diverse that they rapidly disintegrate. Some have entered governments, while others give their support. These are obviously the most influential, but such a tactic is rarely possible in systems not using forms of proportional representation. The anti-immigration parties have generally been described as on the “Right” and have had most influence on voters and parties at that end of the political spectrum (which is still recognised in Europe whatever may be true of the English-speaking countries). But they are not classically conservative nor are the electorally appealing ones neo-Nazi. Major parties like Forza Italia, the Vlaams Blok, the Swiss SVP or even the Spanish PP are not exclusively concerned with immigration and ethnicity even when they make this an electoral appeal. Even lesser parties such as One Nation tried to extend their program into areas of general concern. While most minor parties depend on charismatic leaders, these are not always from the same mould as previous fascists or conservatives. One Nation and the Danish Peoples Party were both led by women while Pim Fortuyn was a homosexual and Winston Peters (NZ First) a Maori. Most such parties have been populist and try to draw support from all social sections by appealing to engrained prejudices and fears.

**TABLE TWO; Support for anti-immigration parties in Europe and Australasia**

State	Party	Recent Vote	Year	Government/ Opposition
Austria	FPÖ	10.2%	2002	Government
Belgium	Vlaams Blok	9.9%	1999	Opposition
Denmark	Danish PP(DF)	12%	2001	Government
Finland	PS-True Finns	1%	1999	Opposition
France	Front National	16.9%	2002 (pres)	Opposition
Germany	NPD/REP/DVU	3.3%	1998	Not applicable
Greece	n.a.	n.a.	2000	Not applicable
Ireland	Imm.Control P.	n.a.	2002	Not applicable
Italy	Liga Nord AN	3.9% 12%	2002	Government
Netherlands	Pim Fortuyn	17%	2002	Government

Norway	Progress Pty	14.7%	2001	Government
Portugal	Popular Party	8.8%	2002	Government
Spain	Plat.España	0.04%	2000	Not applicable
Sweden	Sw.Democrats	1.4%	2002	Not applicable
Switzerland	Swiss PP (SVP)	22.6%	1999	Government
UK	Br.National P.	0.2%	2001	Not applicable
Australia	One Nation	4.3%	2001	Opposition
New Zealand	NZ First	4.5%	1999	Opposition

**Note:** “Government” means either that the party is in government or that the government depends on it in parliament. ‘Opposition’ means that the party is represented in parliament but that it does not support the government. ‘Not applicable’ means that the party is not represented in parliament. ‘Recent vote’ is for the latest lower house election (except for France).

### **The Impact on Policy**

While much attention has been focussed on specifically anti-immigration or extreme ‘Right’ parties, most policy continues to be made by major ruling parties. These will, of course, take account of any significant rise in electoral support for the minor parties, as well as keeping an eye on public opinion polls. As most European governments are coalitions or dependent on minority support, the anti-immigration parties may exert considerably more direct influence than they do in the one or two party governments of Britain, Australia, Ireland, Sweden or New Zealand. They may even, as recently in the Netherlands, give power over immigration to a minority party. But a more normal reaction in all systems has been for the major party of the “Right” to pre-empt nationalist and even xenophobic policies and thus hope to undermine the vote for minorities. The Australian Liberals did this with much success in 2001, whereas the British Conservatives failed miserably to do so in the same year. In both countries the major party of the “Left” found itself adopting policies which it had previously denounced, as a way of maintaining its vote especially among the working class. British Labour, like many European parties, began to stress the need for national unity and social solidarity, especially after the transfer of the Home Secretaryship from Jack Straw to David Blunkett in 2001. Australian Labor endorsed most of the policies of the Coalition government arising from the detention and transfer of asylum seekers in 2001 and the security measures adopted in response to the September attack on New York. Other social democratic parties were less willing to shift but some suffered electorally as a result. But there were quite different results in superficially similar societies. In Austria the FPÖ lost half its vote in 2002 but this went over to the mainstream Peoples Party (ÖVP) with whom they had been in coalition. In Switzerland the Swiss Peoples Party (SVP) supported a referendum, opposed by all other parties, which would have made it almost impossible for asylum seekers to enter by land. This was very narrowly defeated in November 2002.

Policy shifts in the last years of the century may be summarised as:

- Reasserting national culture, assimilation and loyalty
- Tightening the control of asylum seekers
- Seeking international co-operation in controlling movement
- Reducing commitments to multiculturalism and humanitarianism
- Attempting to institute more 'rational' immigration systems

These shifts have not been incompatible with continued assertion of human rights, racial equality and the need to 'integrate' immigrant minorities and to cater for 'indigenous' languages and cultures. Most anti-immigration parties claim not to be racist. Violent racism is limited to the extra-parliamentary fringes and is denounced by leaders of all parliamentary persuasions. But allegations of crime, drug trafficking and political violence are often used in mainstream debates. Christian conservatives may join with secular liberals in criticising some aspects of Islam. More recently the equation of Islam with terrorism has made the lot of many Muslims difficult. However, it must also be said that some Muslim activists, especially in Britain, France and Germany, have not made the life of their coreligionists any easier by endorsing some terrorist actions.

## **Conclusions**

For those who like neat correlations, there is little in the recent European experience of resistance to immigration which gives much guidance. The two major recipients of asylum seekers, Germany and Britain, do not have strong racist parties. While this may be inhibited in Germany by post-War anti-Nazi legislation and a cutoff level for parliamentary representation, there is a remarkable contrast with the experience of neighbours such as conservative Austria or the liberal Netherlands and Denmark. In the United Kingdom neither the National Front nor the British National Party has ever won more than the odd local government seat. However both Britain and Germany have an unfortunate recent record of racial violence - leading to deaths in both. These are not confined to recent immigrants and refugees but often involve the local children of those who have been settled for many years. Those who seek for socio-economic causes might note that the recent unemployment level in Germany has been more than twice that in Britain. Those who prefer cultural-historical influences, might note that race rioting is as prevalent in democratic Britain as it is among the heirs of Nazism or the DDR and that they, and social democratic Sweden, have some of the most violent neo-Nazi groups.

For the rest of Europe one might distinguish between states where anti-immigrant parties are weak; those where they are popular enough to make a claim on effective legislative representation; and those where they have been strong enough to join governments or to lend them necessary support. Anti-immigrant parties exist throughout Europe and, like other minorities, have legislative representation through proportional representation systems. Thus a party like One Nation would have secured seats in the lower house if it had contested under most of the European electoral systems. However, the

systems alone do not account for differing parliamentary influences. Ireland, with a relatively pure form of PR, did not return the Immigration Reform Platform to the Dail. Britain has only given very limited support to the National Front and its successor, the British National Party. Sweden saw off the Swedish Democrats just as surely as Australia saw off One Nation, though New Zealand did give parliamentary representation to New Zealand First with a similar level of voting support. New Zealand First was almost the only major anti-immigration party to increase its support into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, though this has yet to be tested at the polls.

Australia and New Zealand found themselves in the unenviable position of having quite strong anti-immigrant parties, although ones with a very volatile history. One Nation secured 9 per cent of the national vote in 1998 and 23 per cent of the vote in Queensland in the same year. These are high by European standards. While it might be argued that racism and xenophobia were not the sole appeal of these Australasian parties, the same could be said of some European parties like Forza Italia. One Nation was frustrated by the Australian election system, while NZ First benefited from different arrangements close to those in most European states. One Nation disintegrated rapidly, but so has the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands.

Despite all this variety, some generalisations might be made:

- \* anti-immigrant and racist parties tend to rise quickly but to plateau or even decline;
- anti-immigration parties lie on the 'right' of the spectrum and draw most of their supporters from the 'right' parties;
- they do, however, tend to appeal to the less educated, the provincial and those often not directly affected by immigration but subscribing to 'traditional' ideas of the nation;
- street violence is often a sign of frustration when there is no electorally effective anti-immigrant party;
- the main party(ies) of the 'right' will co-opt much of the program of anti-immigrant parties
- the parties of the 'democratic left' may respond by also co-opting or not resisting but are often at a disadvantage because of the ambivalence of their members;
- there will be a significant element 'fighting racism' but without much effective electoral following as it, too, is seen as "extremist";
- the overall trend is to tighten immigration and refugee control with public approval, partly as a method of reducing anti-immigrant support.

The overall impact of parliamentary politics in Europe and Australia in the past five years has been to domesticate what might otherwise have developed as a violent and destabilising reaction not only against asylum seekers but also against many longer established ethnic minorities. Even when ethnic politics has spawned violence, this has not been electorally acceptable. Violence against minorities has either been sporadic and unorganised or has been adopted by parties like the BNP in England or the neo-Nazis in Germany. In Australia most of the violence in the last 1990s was directed against One Nation rather than by it. The major political parties have acknowledged a degree of ethnic variety even

if they will not subscribe to multiculturalism as a desirable policy. The European parties have also accepted a need to allow free movement within the European Union and substantial tourist, student and business migration globally. Australia and New Zealand have gone further in operating quite substantial programs of planned immigration designed to increase their workforces, to unite families and to prevent population decline. All the states reviewed have maintained their commitment to the Refugee Convention and Protocol, though they have interpreted this very differently. The impact of anti-immigration parties has generally been to restrict this commitment. However, they alone are not to blame. In the face of large numbers of asylum seekers the British government from the “Left” has modified its previous liberalism without facing a serious minor party challenge, just as the Australian party of the “Right” did when confronted with One Nation. Effective minor parties certainly sharpen the ‘debate’ but they are not always the determining factor.

The ethnic situation in most of Europe is currently more combustible than in Australasia. Even states which have negligible electoral followings for extremist parties, such as the United Kingdom, Ireland or Sweden, may have violent minorities. The aggravating role of the British National Party in the riots in Lancashire in 2001 is a case in point. Both the BNP and the much more overtly neo-Nazi Combat 18 have strong links with European neo-Nazi groups and influence on the racist elements in soccer and rock music. Similar groups in Denmark, Sweden and Germany are openly dedicated to violence rather than to electoral politics. Yet at the same time governments, churches and NGOs are actively endorsing multicultural and integrative policies and denouncing racism. The European Union and individual states guarantee minority language rights to a greater extent than ever before.

“Left” groups often clash violently with the racist extremists, creating an atmosphere of instability which is belied by election figures. The tabloid media contributes to the atmosphere of danger and violence and is not subject to any effective limitations, unlike broadcasting. Police forces in many states are reluctant to report violent crimes and disturbances as ‘racially motivated’ even when this is evidently the case. The response of governments and political parties to this is to tighten restrictions and to demand assimilation, which they believe will appeal to the majority. Overall, the security of immigrants, refugees and even long-established minorities is under threat. This has been made more serious by the escalating fear of terrorism and the rising numbers of asylum seekers. The Australian government has responded to this by maintaining its draconian regime against unauthorised arrivals, transferring the One Nation vote to itself in the process. It has met with little resistance from the official Opposition and has improved its electoral support nationally though not at the State level where other issues predominate. This has worked to the advantage of the national government, rather than encouraging specifically anti-immigration parties as in many European states.

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