

From Brexit to Rwanda and back

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Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in! No, that's not casting the UK as Michael Corleone from the Godfather trilogy and the EU as the mafia. It's how I felt upon seeing the news of the Court of Appeal striking down the government's Rwanda migrant expulsion plan.

Migration is such a central theme in Brexit, as it is in other populist projects all over the world, that I've had no choice but to keep mentioning it. I was all set to move on to more summery subjects, such as the pipedream of Net Zero and the ravages of climate change, as Europe is bracing for another record hot and dry summer with attendant forest fires, skyrocketing A/C use and thus the restarting of coal-fired power plants etc. etc. But no, the court ruling trumps all that.

Or does it? Labour leader Keir Starmer in a reaction rightly called the government scheme "a gimmick". Never mind his failure to reiterate that he holds the scheme to be unethical, he did point out that the legal viability of the plan had apparently not been seriously considered by its sponsors. That would be a charitable interpretation. The more cynical and therefore much more likely explanation is that the few responsible adults in the cabinet go along with this cruel and pointless antediluvian throwback of a migration policy to: a – placate the Braverman/ERG wing of the Conservative Party and/or b – use it to show their steely determination to voters while knowing very well that the plan won't go anywhere, and without actually planning to do anything meaningful on migration.

That the migration issue both stoked Brexit and has been exacerbated by it, I've argued before and has been attested to by studies and surveys*. It's ironic therefore that the EU is actually coming to the rescue. Not that keeping migrants out of the UK is the objective of its new plans but it would be a welcome side-effect for the government if the number of small boat crossings are affected. New EU rules to keep out more migrants at the external borders and make expulsions easier could impact the flow to the UK as well. But most of all it's the looming €1 billion deal with Tunisia that could further limit migration and "people smuggling" across the Mediterranean. Because, if fewer make it to Europe, fewer might come to the UK. The great success of Brexit is that the British government will not have to contribute one penny towards that prize.

That being said, the UK has its own version of the existing EU deal with Turkey and the upcoming one with Tunisia; it's paying France some € 0,5 billion over three years to keep migrants over there rather than let them cross the Channel. As migrant and refugee organisations have argued, such deals often have disastrous consequences for the people involved, who in the best case languish in so-called temporary reception centres and at worst die in ever more complicated and desperate crossings. The more humane and probably even less costly alternatives, such as providing more safe and legal routes for entry, faster processing and if unavoidable faster return to actual home countries if these are really safe appear to be electorally less attractive than the muscular 'stop de boats' and 'send them to Rwanda' one-liners.

Unfortunately, there is very little pushback against the anti-migration rhetoric and nationalist jingoism that contributed to Brexit. On the contrary, it seems to be regarded as counter-productive by many in the former Remain camp, to bring up the subject of xenophobia in relation to Leave voters. If migration comes up at all in the still-raging Brexit discussions, it's mostly presented as something that Leave voters should not be blamed for, but rather as something outside of their control, that should be studied and even understood. They were lied to and maybe manipulated but don't bear responsibility for their beliefs, is becoming the mantra on the pro-European side of the

debate and in Labour. Of course, such an approach is seen as necessary to recapture the Red Wall constituencies.

Apart from immediate electoral concerns, continuing to call out the xenophobia that played a part in the Brexit debate is seen as unnecessarily polarising and not moving the needle on the issue. There is much more focus on positive signs such as the support for Gary Lineker and polls that show that migration is not much of a priority for voters. But this all means that a lot of anti-immigrant rhetoric goes unchallenged and that voters are being lied to once more on the subject of migration. Even Labour's 'alternative' approach to the government's Rwanda plan is at best a red herring and at worst a shameless deception: Tackling the people smuggling syndicates that profit off the migrants' desperation will not take away that desperation nor stop them from trying to make risky crossings.

Possibly Labour and some Remainers are letting themselves be influenced by the success of the Danish Social Democrats who gained power in 2019 after adopting the far right's migration stance. Now Denmark rivals the Tories in its zest for expulsions, even trying to send Syrians back to Damascus. Apart from the question of whether you can still call the Social Democrats a progressive party, the danger of becoming electorally irrelevant at some point looms large. Overall progressive Denmark is more the exception than the rule, in Europe and across the world. Time and again the pattern of progressive parties adopting populist and hard-right policies on issues such as migration, has been shown to either not work or be counter-productive, with these parties often becoming irrelevant. Because why vote for a faux-right party if you can vote for the real deal?

Migration is a complex and sensitive issue and should be addressed as such. Allowing far-right rhetoric on the subject to capture the political centre ground as happened in Denmark and is happening in the UK, distorts the whole of politics. To my knowledge, no mainstream political party anywhere argues for completely open or completely sealed borders. The debate may seem to circle around the intricacies of the numbers and provenance of people allowed in and their rights and obligations once they're in the country. Yet it can have an enormous impact on how an inherently vulnerable group of people is treated, leading both to draconian measures such as long-term detention and/or expulsion to uncertain destinations and to a general toughening of society's attitudes towards them. It can also serve to undermine the commitment to a rules-based international order when countries start to blame treaties that they have signed up to, for being unable to carry out harsher anti-migration policies. As Brexit has shown, letting populist rhetoric on the subject go unchallenged is playing with fire.

*See, for example: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/xenophobia-brexit/> and <https://www.opinium.com/racism-rising-since-brexit-vote/>