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Europe's Intensifying Immigration Debate

Elites and non-elites are in strong disagreement on the issue.

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In 2006, Fredrik Reinfeldt led the Swedish Right to power after more than a decade in the wilderness. His star reached its peak as fiscally prudent Sweden weathered the euro-zone crisis well. In the United States, Reinfeldt's success was closely monitored by Henry Olsen at *NATIONAL REVIEW ONLINE* and by Republican political strategists. *The Economist* predicted that "by 2014 Mr. Reinfeldt will have been in power for eight years. Given the economy's strength, few would bet against his winning again."

Far from winning again, Reinfeldt and his coalition parties on the right suffered a crushing defeat in the 2014 elections. The combined Right received only 39 percent of the vote, its lowest share ever recorded. But neither were there many smiles on the faces of the victorious Social Democrats and their allies. The Left coalition started its election campaign with a massive lead. When the votes were counted, it was stunned to see that it had made zero net gains. The only victors were the Sweden Democrats, a one-issue, anti-immigration party that more than doubled its vote share, to 13 percent.

In recent days, the terrorist attacks in France have dominated the headlines. Sweden has thankfully not experienced the same levels of urban crime, ethnic tensions, and political extremism as France. In terms of economic integration, however, the situation of immigrants in Sweden is if anything slightly worse than in France. Until recently, it was considered poor taste to bring up this development in respectable European circles. Increasingly, the continuing social impact of immigration is tearing up the political order in Sweden as well as in the rest of Europe.

Western European politics during the post-war era centered on the conflict between the traditional Right and the labor movement regarding the size of the welfare state. Immigration is redrawing those lines of conflict. The Left is splitting between, on one side, intellectual socialists and liberals who support multiculturalism and, on the other, working-class voters and union members who don't. On the European Right, libertarians, the business lobby, and urban progressives tend to support large-scale immigration while conservatives, the rural population, populists, and nationalists tend to oppose it.

In Sweden, despite a relentlessly pro-immigration media, only 18 percent of Swedish voters consider it a good proposal to take in more refugees, according to the latest poll. A reticent yet

defiant plurality of 50 percent state that doing so would be a bad idea, with the remaining respondents declining to state an opinion.

The Swedish establishment has not allowed this public opinion to interfere with policy, a political strategy that requires ever more pressure to uphold. Following the fall of Reinfeldt a new coalition of Social Democrats and Greens came to power in Sweden. The latter view open borders as a human right. Like Reinfeldt, the left-wing government has declared immigration policy non-negotiable.

A few weeks ago, budgetary chaos brought on by the new political situation forced the Social Democratic government to announce a snap election, the first since 1958. But this was not the end of political upheaval. After secret negotiations between the Right and the Left, the prime minister and the leaders of the opposition gave a joint press conference and announced that the snap election had been canceled. The Swedish opposition on the right instead agreed to support every budget put forth by the left-wing government until 2022, with the Left giving the same guarantee should the Right come to power.

Such a cartel to circumvent parliamentarianism is unprecedented in Scandinavian political tradition and has caused a sharp backlash. The immigration crisis has transformed Sweden's boringly stable politics into something reminiscent of southern Europe's. Far from having been thwarted, however, polling indicated that support for the Sweden Democrats is increasing further following this episode of parliamentary chaos.

It may be useful to look closely at the background to these events. Sweden is not a nation of immigrants. Geographically isolated and culturally insular, Scandinavia was until recently among the world's most homogeneous regions. In 1900, only 0.7 percent of Sweden's population was foreign-born. Today, Sweden takes in more immigrants relative to its population than the U.S. did at the peak of the transatlantic migration. Swedes have been better at admitting refugees than at integrating them into their society. Around 82 percent of working-age native-born Swedes are employed. The figure is only 58 percent among immigrants and lower still among non-Western immigrants. The gap in employment between the native-born and immigrants is the second highest in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The ministry of labor reports that "almost 60 percent" of newly arrived refugees lack a high-school education, and Sweden's high-tech, skill-intensive labor market has shown little demand for low-skilled labor. Today, immigrants constitute 16 percent of the Swedish population, 51 percent of the long-term unemployed, and 57 percent of recipients of welfare payments.

Such facts are rarely reported in the Swedish media because bringing attention to them is easily perceived as bigotry. The media and a deep-pocketed business lobby campaigning for additional migrants and guest workers have instead bombarded the public with the message that immigration from developing countries is somehow profitable, even necessary. Hugh Eakin of *The New York Review of Books*, writing in the *New York Times*, has noted that “in Sweden, a closely patrolled pro-immigration ‘consensus’ has sustained extraordinarily liberal policies while placing a virtual taboo on questions about the social and economic costs.”

This blackout on facts thought to cast immigration in a negative light has trapped the elites in a cocoon of willful ignorance. At the most recent meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Reinfeldt stated that immigrants to Sweden “worked more” than natives. He might even believe this demonstrably false claim. Bringing up negative aspects of immigration is taboo, while presenting uplifting claims about it is rewarded, regardless of the claims’ accuracy. The immigration policy devised by a consensus of Swedish libertarians and socialists in this intellectual climate is correspondingly radical.

Sweden constitutes less than 2 percent of the population of the European Union but, according to Eurostat, accounted for approximately 20 percent of all asylum approvals granted by European Union countries in 2014. When Reinfeldt took over, the immediate cost to taxpayers of processing and settling new arrivals was around \$1 billion per year. This year the cost will be \$3 billion, and it is projected to reach \$5 billion soon.

At first, the media simply did not report the cost increase. But, as Philip K. Dick quipped, reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away. Runaway costs reduce available resources whether the media report them or not.

As the 2014 election neared, Reinfeldt was down in the polls and needed a game-changer. In a notorious speech, he decided to report the budgetary projections, partly because they were simply becoming too large to ignore. The prime minister referred to Sweden as a “humanitarian superpower” and pleaded with the Swedish public to “open their hearts.” His speech was hailed as a success by the media but was followed by a record loss of votes from the Right to the Sweden Democrats, a scandal-plagued, deeply unpopular party with xenophobic roots. This did not signify any newfound enthusiasm for the Sweden Democrats. Rather, when immigration became more salient as an issue, those who opposed immigration found their way to the only available alternative.

In reporting on rising European-immigration tensions, there is a tendency to overestimate the role of Islam and to underestimate the role of the economic divide between natives and immigrants. The

number of Muslims in Europe and the speed of demographic transformation are often widely exaggerated using unreliable estimates. In Sweden, currently 8 percent of the population originate in Muslim-majority countries. But surveys on religious self-identification show that only 3 percent of Sweden's population self-identify as adherents of Islam. This should not be surprising given that a high share of immigrants to Europe from the Middle East are from Christian minorities such as Assyrians and Maronites.

Other immigrants from Bosnia, Iran, Kurdistan, and Turkey tend to be secular nonbelievers such as myself. For youth growing up in the West, the temptation of hedonistic Western culture over ascetic Salafism should not be underestimated. As I like to point out, American gangster rap is a stronger and more problematic cultural influence in the Swedish ghetto than is radical Islam. Of course, the small minority that sympathizes with extremism still leaves hundreds or thousands of potential terrorists.

It is here worth noting that cultural assimilation is closely linked to economic assimilation. The lack of economic integration of immigrants is leading to the emergence of a new ethnic class society in Europe, with occupational status becoming visibly linked to ethnicity. In office environments in Paris, Berlin, and Stockholm, janitors and cafeteria staff increasingly look and speak differently from management and white-collar professionals. The so-called visible minorities of Europe are rarely allowed to forget their lower socioeconomic status or that they are outsiders who were never really welcomed by large segments of the native population. Despite lip service to the contrary, Muslim immigrants sense the silent collective distrust whenever some random extremist runs amok.

Compared with their European counterparts, Muslim migrants to the United States and Canada tend to be both better off economically and less likely to sympathize with radicalism. Among those European Muslims who are economically integrated, the overwhelming majority really have become culturally integrated as well. However, the ethnic economic divide in Europe is vast, and it's increasing, with continued immigration from third-world countries.

In Sweden, immigrants now earn around 40 percent less on average than the native-born, a socioeconomic time bomb. Intergenerational mobility has not closed these gaps in Europe. Poverty and segregation tend to be passed on to a frustrated second generation who never asked to be born in countries where people who look like them are de facto second-class citizens. More than any bearded imams, the youth are radicalized by left-liberal Western media that blame these problems on European racism, capitalism, colonialism, U.S imperialism, and other updated forms of original sin.

In Sweden, Reinfeldt's party Moderaterna once offered a more moderate immigration platform. But its libertarian wing has since gained control of immigration policy. The party has now followed its open-borders ideals to their logical conclusion. Reinfeldt himself appears to be a true believer in the libertarian open-borders ideology. In one speech to Middle Eastern immigrants, he declared that "the fundamentally Swedish is merely barbarism. The rest of development has come from abroad."

In 2007, a Swedish artist portrayed the prophet Mohammed as a dog, causing yet another cartoon crisis. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and other Islamic leaders denounced Sweden and demanded an apology. Reinfeldt did not neglect to open his heart, inviting the ambassadors of Iran, Egypt, and other Muslims countries for a "dialogue" not open to the press. Algeria's ambassador stated that Reinfeldt's conference "was an excellent initiative taken in a spirit of appeasement." Whatever Reinfeldt said in the meeting, it appears to have pleased Iran's ambassador, who said: "It is my view that the Swedish government has handled this situation well. Causing offence does not belong to the concept of freedom of speech."

Following his defeat, Reinfeldt has become even more open-hearted in his political philosophy, raising eyebrows both in Sweden and abroad. In one widely ridiculed interview, dismissing the strains that record levels of immigration have put on the country's economy and social fabric, he offered this analysis:

What does the word "enough" mean? Is Sweden full? Is the Nordic region full? Are we too many people? We are 25 million people living in the North. I often fly over the Swedish countryside. I would recommend more people to do the same. There are endless fields and forests. There's as much space as you can imagine. Those who claim that the country is full, they must demonstrate where it is full.

Reinfeldt recently questioned the right of Sweden to enforce its borders, bizarrely suggesting that ethnic Swedes also tend to be recently arrived immigrants:

What is Sweden as a country? Is this nation owned by those who have lived here for four generations, or by those who invent some borders? Or is this an open country made up of people who arrive here, in midlife, perhaps born in another country? And it is what they make of Sweden that is Sweden.

For the record, Swedes who arrived four generations ago are trivially few. Sweden was historically an isolated country, hardly one recently populated by immigrants. The ancestors of most ethnic Swedes have lived there for hundreds or even thousands of years. Until recently, this indisputable fact made it difficult even for Marxists to question the moral legitimacy of Sweden and its borders. Today, elderly Swedes who literally participated in building the country are forced to listen to the

political leader of the Right deny their historical legitimacy. As a Kurd, I am particularly sensitive to attempts to use revisionist history to delegitimize a people.

The bipartisan consensus on immigration in Sweden did not produce successful policy. The ironclad cartel merely allowed the elite to override the marketplace of ideas and pursue a course that has so far proven disastrous. This holds lessons for Americans as well as for Swedes. The conservative establishment in the United States increasingly consists of “Davos men,” who identify more with elites in other countries than with domestic non-elites. Their interests and values increasingly differ from those of the people who have delegated power to them and elevated them to office. This makes elite collusion a real danger to the popular legitimacy of the institutions of representative democracy, a problem that is not limited to the immigration issue.