

Austria: EU hypocrisy

In the days following Austria's General election, both Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the EU Commission and the country's President, Alexander van der Bellen, have had a gentle word with Sebastian Kurz, the man who will soon be sworn in as the country's new Chancellor, about forming a coalition.

The 31-year old Kurz has been told that he must be a good boy and form a "pro-European" government – in other words, his party, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), must share power with the Social Democrats (SPÖ), who came in third place, rather than the second-placed Freedom Party (FPÖ), led by Heinz-Christian Strache. Juncker has not hidden his feelings about the FPÖ. "I do not like them," he said bluntly. "With these right-wing populists, it is neither possible to debate nor having a dialogue."

The advice is likely to fall on deaf ears. At one point during the campaign, the Eurosceptic FPÖ was in pole position. Kurz's tactics which resulted in his party overtaking them and gaining the largest share of the vote were simple – to borrow the FPÖ's tough language on immigration. It worked, but given the consequential blurring of the lines between the ÖVP and the FPÖ, a coalition between these two parties looks far more likely than a left-right coalition involving the SPÖ.

An ÖVP/FPÖ coalition would not be the first as the two parties governed Austria together between 2000 and 2005. At the time, the inclusion of a party like the FPÖ in a government of an EU country was greeted with horror. "The far right is in power", screamed the headlines at the time and the other member states imposed diplomatic sanctions upon Austria. This achieved nothing and they were quietly dropped a few months later.

However, the FPÖ's success in last Sunday's elections has once

again cast the spotlight on its past. According to Wikipedia (And if the article was incorrect, it would have been subject to challenge), the party's first leader was Anton Reinthaller, who was a former Nazi Minister of Agriculture and an SS officer. Even now, over seventy years after the end of the Second World War, anyone with connections to Hitler is regarded as highly suspect. Another Eurosceptic party with a dubious figure in its past is the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) party whose first auditor, Gustaf Ekström, was a Waffen-SS veteran, again according to Wikipedia. The media has ensured that this fact is widely known.

So two European political parties are beyond the pale because of their Nazi connections. Fair enough, but what about Hans Josef Globke, the Chief in staff to West Germany's Chancellor Konrad Adenauer? Adenauer is regarded as one of the founding fathers of European unification and was even commemorated as such on a special gold Belgian coin in 2002. His Chief of staff, however, was involved in drafting legislation on the confiscation of Jewish property and removal of their political rights during the Hitler years. The first President of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein, was involved with the Nazis, although the Wikipedia article about him seeks to play this down.

The EU's recent meddling in Ukraine has been aided and abetted by militias with Nazi sympathies, but no one in Brussels seems to care. It seems that dragging up unsavoury details from the past is merely a useful tool for turning public feeling against Eurosceptic groups.

For anyone seeking a more balanced commentary on Austria's election, this blog, written by an English expat resident in that country, provides a helpful antidote to all the hysteria. No one is denying that Austria has taken a tough line on migration. Kurz, who was Foreign minister before becoming Chancellor, was instrumental in this. Furthermore, although

our blogger does not expect Austria, whether or not the FPÖ ends up as part of the government, formally to join the Visegrad group, he thinks it likely that Kurz will stand with them in refusing to accept large numbers of Moslem immigrants. He is also reckoned to be distinctly unsympathetic to Emmanuel Macron's blueprint for closer integration within the €urozone.

In summary, for all the lashing out at the "far right" by the media and pro-EU politicians, Austria's election, like Germany's last month, shows that a sizeable and growing body of voters across the EU are distinctly unimpressed with the federalist vision of Juncker and his fellow-travellers. No wonder Brexit is seen as being such a distraction in Brussels; keeping some members of the remaining EU-27 in order is becoming increasingly difficult and the standoff over Catalonia, the forthcoming elections in the Czech Republic later this month and in Italy next year are most likely to cause a few more headaches for the EU élite.