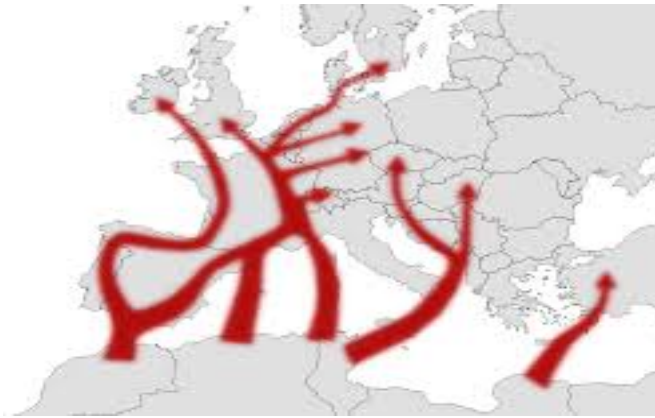


Election 2015: immigration and Europe



by Simon Belt

At several candidate hustings and associated public discussions during this election campaign, the issue of Europe and migration across national borders has come up without exception. Often initiated by people representing UKIP, or indeed those wanting to distance themselves from a tagline of being racist, the two issues of migration and Europe have struck a chord with audiences. Whilst bureaucratic manoeuvrings on Europe as such is one of the duller of political issues of recent times, immigration and independence from the political administration by Europe are issues that draw out how we approach democracy and sovereignty of the electorate.

As nearly 2,000 migrants have died as they tried to cross the Mediterranean to Europe this year, many are asking 'What can be done?'. The simple answer is to liberalise Europe's approach to immigration; open the borders to the arrival of foreign migrants and welcome aspiring citizens from Africa and the Middle East. Opening the borders of the UK though means challenging the grip that an undemocratic and insular Europe has on the minds of liberals so keen to promote the structure and practises of the European Union in contrast to the supposed little Englander mentality of UKIP.

Whilst UKIP certainly help to scapegoat migrant workers for the longer term economic decline in the UK, they are hardly original in this activity and certainly nowhere near as effective as others have been. A whole series of immigration laws, mostly campaigned for and enacted by Labour governments it should be noted, have been far more effective at fingering the foreigner as a threat to the British economy or British workers pay and conditions. At every stage of tightening immigration laws, politicians from both Labour and Conservatives have consistently said Britain would be worse off if migration into the UK by foreigners was closed off. In contrast, the liberalisation of the labour market within the European Union is presented as either a price worth paying for the protectionist trade alliance or a positive way of combating the little Englander approach of the overly nationalistic types on the right.

So what should we make of those wanting independence from European bureaucrats who bypass national electorates when creating their free market of labour within Europe, the political demands for national sovereignty over labour and immigration laws within national boundaries, and of the plight of foreign nationals looking to live and work in the Europe and the UK? I suppose at the heart of claims for national sovereignty is the notion and practise of excersing power, the governance of that power by and for citizens rather than subjects. The notion of sovereignty is built around the autonomous individual who has purpose and expresses their interest through collective actions of like-minded individuals. The European Union is a decidedly estranged institution of bureaucrats who are not elected by the European electorate.

When did we in the UK have a campaign or vote for the free movement of labour within the European Union? I'm definitely for the free movement of labour, but there's an anti-democratic trend being played out here by the EU that is actually in opposition to the free movement of labour. For me, limitations of the EU's 'free movement' of labour is graphically and horrifically expressed in the drowning of thousands of migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean, and the response by campaigners during the election hustings. The response by most candidates to the issue being raised was to call for the renewal of funding for search and rescue missions to be restored in the short-term, and that those responsible for human trafficking by providing innapropriate transportation for the 'illegal' immigrants should be prosecuted. Surely the problem is the fortress of laws and policing of borders by the 'search and rescue' naval vessels of Europe that force people looking for a better life into unsuitable forms of transport.

Campaigns that victimise the migrants by focussing on the children involved, and the powerlessness of the adults, makes arguing for the free movement of labour more difficult by sustaining the consensus since the 60's of worthy legitimate and undeserving migrants. The campaign for independence from Europe, whilst it may be little Englander in form, at least has the merit of promoting the purposefulness of citizens, which is a precondition for campaigning for the free movement of all people across all borders in search of a better life. Being nannied by European bureaucrats or those patronising the migrants coming to Europe is the greatest barrier to freeing us from nationalists policing our borders.