

And it's good night Vienna. How (not) to deal with the populist radical right: the Conservatives, UKIP and some lessons from the heartland

The Conservative Party is facing nothing less than a transformation in its electoral environment. Shielded for so long by the country's plurality electoral system, the Tories have never really experienced truly serious competitive pressure on their right flank. Even when the National Front (in the 1970s) and the British National Party (in the 2000s) experienced short-lived successes, the threat they presented never came close to that posed by populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in continental Europe (Goodwin, 2007). There, since the 1990s, the success of PRRPs' anti-system, anti-elite and anti-immigration appeals have put mainstream actors in a number of countries under significant, even existential pressure (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Eatwell, 2000; Downs, 2001; Bale, 2003 and 2008; Carter, 2005; van Spanje and van der Brug, 2007; Meguid, 2008; van Spanje, 2010; Akkerman, 2012; de Lange, 2012; Mudde, 2013). In many continental European democracies this has led to responses ranging from the use of similar (if sometimes slightly diluted) rhetoric to the radical right, through the adoption of its policies, right up to its co-option into coalition government. Not for nothing, then, have scholars spoken of 'contagion effects' (Harmel and Svasand, 1997; Pettigrew, 1998; Minkenberg, 2002; Schain, 2002; Norris, 2005).

In the UK, the populist radical right has come nowhere near government and there is precious little hard evidence that recourse to restrictive rhetoric or policies on immigration on the part of the Conservative Party has been driven by its occasional concerns about far-right incursions into its electoral territory and its organisation (see Pitchford, 2011). Instead, it has reflected a more prosaic concern on the part of the Tories to achieve and maintain the upper hand over their mainstream Labour rival and a desire to show they are in touch with public opinion on the issue (see Bale, 2013). However, with the recent electoral gains of the United

Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the threat from the populist radical right has suddenly become rather more serious (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Lynch and Whitaker, 2012 and Webb and Bale, forthcoming), arguably prompting the Tory leadership to respond more actively by sharpening its message on immigration. The government that it leads was already committed to reducing net migration into the UK from ‘the hundreds to the tens of thousands’. But since suffering a swing to UKIP in local elections and by-elections in the Spring of 2013, it has also begun exploring ever more ingenious ways – from additional legislation to so-called ‘Go-Home’ vans and the threat to withdraw from the European Convention of Human rights and exclude foreigners from social security and child care – of signalling to the public that it is going to make life even more difficult for current and prospective immigrants.

This raises a crucial question, namely is this upping of the ante and turning of the screw the right way for the Conservative Party to go if it wants to secure its position vis-à-vis its populist challenger or could there instead be some serious downsides? In other words, will some kind of feint, or even a genuine shift, towards UKIP by the Conservative Party prove to be a panacea or will it instead see them opening Pandora’s Box? This article addresses this strategic question for British Conservatives by openly looking to learn from overseas experience and from one outstanding but crucial case. We begin by discussing the Conservatives’ strategies vis-à-vis the British far-right in the distant and recent past, with a focus on the party’s approach to immigration. Then we link this discussion to experiences from other Conservative parties in continental Europe and in particular the Austrian centre-right People’s Party (ÖVP), which has competed against the populist radical right ‘Freedom Party’ (FPÖ) over almost three decades and has, in the course of so doing, tried all sorts of ways to deal with it, few if any of which, as we go on to show, have enjoyed lasting success.

Clearly the Austrian case differs from the British. Most obviously, it has a proportional electoral system, as of course do almost all other European polities – one of the reasons perhaps why it can sometimes seem easier in the UK to retreat into parochialism and exceptionalism rather than attempting to draw thought-provoking parallels. Nor, of course, are the parties we are comparing exactly the same. Unlike, UKIP, for instance, the FPÖ can trace its roots back to the nineteenth century, yet in the twenty-first it has shown itself far more adept than at attracting the support of younger voters than its British counterpart. As for the ÖVP, as a Christian Democratic rather than a conservative party, it has to take much more account than does its Tory counterpart of countervailing, faith-based arguments for charitable compassion; it also finds it far more difficult, as a pro-EU, internationalist party, than the Conservative Party does to match the populist radical right's Eurosceptic appeal. That said, the similarities are equally strong and striking. The FPÖ and UKIP are both leadership-dominated parties; their votes are disproportionately drawn from men with relatively low-levels of education and social status; they are also a repository of protest votes against the mainstream parties, and mobilise in particular on immigration and integration and hostility toward the EU. Meanwhile, the ÖVP, although it often has to govern in a grand coalition, is clearly the country's predominant centre-right party representing socially conservative and pro-market/pro-property voters as well as the interests of the country's businesses; moreover, like its British counterpart, it has had to cope with a disruptive rival on the right after decades of what was fairly comfortable competition with social democrats and liberals.

Clearly, that disruptive rival arrived on the scene much earlier and more successfully in Austria than it did in the UK, or indeed in most other European countries. But that is precisely why the Austrian experience repays careful study. Because the populist radical right presence in that country has been amongst the longest and enduring anywhere in the world, the country's mainstream centre-right has had the time and opportunity to run the gamut of responses to that

presence, all the way from trying to play and/or put it down, through aping its appeals at and between elections, to, eventually, a six-year coalition government between the mainstream centre-right and PRRPs – the longest of its kind in Western Europe, where such governments still of course represent the exception rather than the rule (Mudde, 2013, 4). The disappointing results of all those responses should, we argue, give pause for thought to anyone in Britain believing they have some sort of silver-bullet solution to the threat that UKIP poses to the Conservative Party, whether they involve freezing it out, matching its demands or moving to co-opt it. Indeed, even the most radical of these solutions, namely changing the electoral system so that UKIP, rather than simply eroding the Tories' vote, also becomes a potential coalition partner (see Bale, 2006), is unlikely to solve the problem in the long term.

This time it's serious: the radical right in Britain

For a very long time, and even as the Liberals/SDP/Liberal Democrats as well as Scottish and Welsh regionalist parties effectively turned Britain into a two-and-a-half-party system (Webb, 2000, 9), the Conservative Party faced no serious competitors on the right hand side of the political spectrum. British radical right parties for too long “remained too closely aligned to the ‘fascist tradition’, with their leadership, organisation and policies too heavily influenced by Nazism” (Goodwin, 2007, 242) and failed to develop ‘winning-formulas’ that would appeal to centre-right voters too (Kitschelt, 1996, 241-2 and de Lange, 2007, 416-7). Meanwhile, the majoritarian electoral system helped keep any right wing political force out of parliament, depriving these parties of publicity and resources that other PRRPs on the continent have successfully tapped over time. The BNP, for example, achieved significant gains in the local elections of 2002/03 & 2006 and experienced an “international” breakthrough by gaining two seats in the 2009 European Parliament election. However, it failed to shed its toxic image and performed poorly in the 2010 general elections (where it

took 1.9%) and to all intents and purposes collapsed in the 2012 local elections (Goodwin, 2013).

The recent rise of UKIP, however, has catalysed the debate on whether the British radical right has at last managed to identify broader voter potential and to develop more promising formulas for mobilization (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). UKIP's rise to prominence began with successes in the 2004 European elections (gaining 12 seats) and continued in 2009 (13 seats). On the local level it achieved its best result in the 2013 council elections (gaining 147 council seats and achieving around 20% of the overall vote-share). In the same year it also performed very strongly in parliamentary by-elections, beating the Conservatives into third place in Eastleigh in February 2013. Even though UKIP has so far failed to perform anywhere near this well in general elections, it has continuously increased its vote-share since 1997 and the party's 919,471 votes in the 2010 election represented 3.1% of the total, making it the strongest British party without a seat in Westminster. Factoring in the predicted increase of votes for UKIP in the European elections of 2014, even if it fails to win a seat in Westminster in 2015, many Conservatives worry that by further increasing its vote, it could effectively hand the election to Labour by costing Tory candidates in marginal seats valuable votes.

The Tory response: now and then

These recent developments – and the fact that UKIP is not seen by potential voters as anything like as extremist as the NF and the BNP – mean that the need for a response and the nature of that response have become pressing questions for Tory strategists. Beyond its famously cheery and straight-talking leader, UKIP's appeal boils down to a sense among those left behind by social, economic and political change that the country needs to return to the comforting certainties of a pre-politically correct, multicultural Britain, its signature issues to the EU and immigration, (see Ford and Goodwin, 2014 and Ashcroft, 2013). Presumably,

then, the Conservative's responses need to engage their rival on the right on precisely this territory.

The Tories' strategy on the question of European integration, however, has evolved into a drama of its own, dividing the party and forcing David Cameron's into promising to hold a referendum on Britain's EU-membership. With the "referendum card" played, there is little if any space remaining for further movement to the right on that issue unless the Party were to campaign full-throatedly for the UK to leave the EU – something which seems unlikely at the moment. This, then, draws attention to the other fundamental topic on the populist radical right's agenda, namely immigration and ethnic diversity, a question that, like Europe, has also been debated among Conservatives since at least the late 1950s. Certainly, many commentators had no doubt that the government's announcement of a bill including stricter measures on immigration, which followed UKIP's stunning local election and by-election performances in early 2013, constituted a clear indication of the Tories' willingness to make policy concessions to UKIP in order to help secure some sort of Tory-led government after the 2015 elections. The mounting of high-profile stop-and-search campaigns to find illegal immigrants, the hiring of vans to trail posters encouraging illegal immigrants to hand themselves into the authorities, the attempts to limit free movement for unqualified immigrants and the plans to cut back social security and child benefit for selected groups of foreigners seemed to confirm those suspicions.

Of course, the Conservative Party has a long record of adopting restrictive policies and often populist rhetoric on immigration (see Bale, 2012 and Bale and Partos, forthcoming, for details). Indeed, from the late 1960s onwards, the Tories were generally seen, in polls at least, as the best party to handle immigration by voters who were largely opposed to the idea – a reputation reinforced over the years by controversial (if not always officially sanctioned)

interventions by high-profile Conservative politicians (Powell's 'rivers of blood', Margaret Thatcher's 'swamped', Norman Tebbit's 'cricket test', William Hague's 'foreign land' and Michael Howard's 'are you thinking what we're thinking?'), as well as restrictive legislation (most obviously, the British Nationality Act of 1981). True, David Cameron's elevation to the leadership of the Conservative Party initially signalled a fresh approach to immigration and asylum as part of a broader "decontamination" strategy which hoped to render the Conservative Party more attractive to small-l liberal voters without in the end alienating its more conservative core. In reality, however, he introduced a dual-track approach, reducing some of the aggression and intensity around the issue while at the same time tightening policy to the extent of promising to reduce non-EU net migration to the tens of thousands (Bale, Hampshire and Partos, 2011, 399, 402).

The Conservatives' return to power in 2010, however, was only a partial success. The slightly increased popularity of UKIP in 2010 supposedly harmed Tory candidates in a number of constituencies and, in the view of many right-wingers in the party anyway, contributed to the Conservatives being denied an overall majority and being forced into a coalition with the Liberal Democrats – even if that coalition's policies on immigration and integration turned out to run (with the exception of an end to the routine detention of children for immigration purposes) entirely along Conservative lines (Hampshire and Bale, forthcoming). Given the number of Conservative MPs and media outlets expressing this opinion, and given the Conservative Party's failure to convince its critics that it is likely to significantly improve upon its electoral performance in 2015, some sort of ratcheting up of already fairly restrictive measures is an obvious response to UKIP's rise in the opinion polls. Indeed, the fact that the latter seemed to go into reverse (albeit remaining in double figures) in the wake of the government's announcement in the spring of 2013 that it was planning another Immigration

Bill may even have strengthened the argument of those who favour matching (or at least coming close to matching) UKIP's offer.

The swiftness and nature of the Conservatives' response suggests that those, including Cameron, who might have been expected to point out the risks entailed – alienating small-l liberals by undermining the decontamination strategy established in opposition – have lost both their voices and the argument. Whether this is or is not a good thing for the country may be an important debate but it is not our main concern. Instead, we confine ourselves to asking whether it will ultimately be a good thing for the Conservatives' capacity to overcome a threat on its flank that is clearly far more serious than any it has previously faced. One way of doing this (although clearly not the only way) is to draw on what happened when another highly successful mainstream centre-right party not only tried to match the offer of the populist radical right but ultimately invited it to join it in government – something that some Tories would clearly have to consider should UKIP ever make it into parliament and the Conservatives again fall short of an overall majority.

Lessons from the heartland: the Austrian People's Party and the populist radical right threat

As with the British Conservatives, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has always been the natural voice for conservative electorate and has long been the main party political player on the Austrian centre-right (Müller, 1994, 57). Its position on that side of the spectrum was seemingly impregnable, even if the changing structure of the electorate (Müller and Steininger, 1994, 4-8) from the late 1960s favoured majorities for the centre left Social Democrats, the SPÖ, which presided over single party governments from 1970 to 1983 and a coalition government with the Freedom Party – the FPÖ, then more of a national-liberal than the populist radical right party it was to become under the leadership of Jörg Haider (Luther,

2000, 428-9, Debus, 2005) – between 1983 and 1986. In fact, the Austrian post-war party system for almost three decades effectively resembled a Westminster-type, bipolar pattern of competition, with the SPÖ and the ÖVP dominating the political system and with the FPÖ playing only a minor role. Owing to this “limping” two-party system (Pelinka and Rosenberger, 2000, 135), both mainstream parties were mainly oriented towards mainstream-party competition, moderated by the countervailing patterns of Austrian consociationalism.¹ Systemic transformations since 1986, however, changed the competitive nature of Austrian party politics. With the permanent establishment of the far left Austrian Greens and – more importantly – the FPÖ’s successful shift to a PRRP-profile, both mainstream parties were confronted with pressure from the fringes, especially from the increasing success of a restructured FPÖ. Continuous voter defection caused a growing threat to the ÖVP and the responses applied by the party covered just about the entire spectrum of strategic options, helping to ensure that they provide lessons for centre-right parties elsewhere, including the UK.

The pariah strategy

The removal of the FPÖ’s liberal party leadership in 1986 precipitated by Jörg Haider and his faction was far more than a purely internal shift; it had remarkable consequences for the party system as a whole. It led to the dissolution of the existing SPÖ/FPÖ government coalition, immediate snap elections and mainstream parties being ‘forced’ into a Grand Coalition after 20 years of fierce opposition. The FPÖ’s doubling of its vote share (to 9.7%) coupled with its strategy of ‘fundamental opposition’ (Pelinka, 2013, 7) led to an immediate – and some might say natural – response. To the system’s existing players, the FPÖ was a pariah and so had to be isolated at all costs – a decision that Haider challenged in ever more impressive style, aiming to force one of the mainstream parties to abandon their approach eventually (Luther, 2011, 456).

Initially, however, the isolation strategy comprised both the political and the policy dimension of competition. Operationally both mainstream parties were tied to the coalition and (by and large) to a mutual non-aggression pact; in policy-terms the main issues of the early Haider-FPÖ (anti-‘Proporz’, anti-elitism, etc.) offered little room for mainstream party manoeuvre since to have adopted them would have compromised their very own clientele (Murphy, 2004, 298-9). However, although the strategy of isolation was maintained on the federal level, in the provinces things weren’t quite as consistent – most prominently in the southern province of Carinthia, where Haider became governor in 1989 after a regional-level pact between the ÖVP and FPÖ overturned the hitherto absolute majority of the Carinthian SPÖ. However, the resignation of Haider only two years later (in the wake of his effective endorsement of the Third Reich’s employment policy) seemed to confirm mainstream parties’ commitment to isolating his party at the federal level at least (Luther, 2000, 429). Even though the FPÖ had grown to 16.6% in the 1990 federal elections, it remained a pariah, with both mainstream party leaders, Franz Vranitzky (SPÖ) and Erhard Busek (ÖVP) openly expressing their disapproval throughout the early 1990s (Pelinka, 2013, 2-3).

By the end of the 1980s, however, immigration and ethnic diversity – in Austria commonly labelled the ‘foreigner question’ (*Ausländerfrage*) – had not only become a major issue for the FPÖ (and, interestingly, the Greens) but had also started to matter to mainstream parties. In the wake of the fall of the Wall, the beginning of the Yugoslavian conflict and an economic boom, the number of foreign-nationals resident in Austria had increased by 80% in just four years from 390,000 people in 1989 to 690,000 in 1993 (Münz, Zuser and Kytir, 2003, 25). A number of restrictive policy measures introduced by the Grand Coalition effectively limited further labour migration and tightened the asylum regime (Bauböck, 1998, 20-3), although publicly both the SPÖ and ÖVP maintained their isolation stance vis-a-vis the FPÖ. Having

obtained some of their policy demands, however, FPÖ-strategists simply perfected their game of outbidding mainstream parties. Whenever the SPÖ or ÖVP introduced further restrictions, the FPÖ, able to rely on widespread and long-lasting anti-immigrant feeling (Rosenberger and Seeber, 2010, 180-5), simply called for further and stronger measures – calls which culminated in an “Austria first” petition introduced by the FPÖ in 1993, demanding a full immigration stop, identity card requirements for foreigners and more police to fight illegal immigration. In the 1994-election, the FPÖ won 22.5% of the vote, while ongoing losses for the ÖVP (which went from 41.3% of the vote in 1986 to 32.1% in 1990 and then 27.7% in 1994) not only meant the end for its leader, Erhard Busek, it also saw the end of the party’s commitment to isolating the FPÖ as a pariah.

Adoption and co-option

It was the newly selected conservative leader, Wolfgang Schüssel, who from 1995 onwards broke the mainstream parties’ consensus on the FPÖ and began to consider cooperation with the ÖVP’s radical right rival. When Schüssel terminated the coalition agreement with the SPÖ in 1995, he reportedly talked to the President of the Republic, Thomas Klestil, about a direct shift to a ÖVP/FPÖ-government before calling the snap election which Klestil’s refusal to consider the option effectively precipitated (Sperl, 2000, 36). After the election both mainstream parties were compelled to form another Grand Coalition, but by the end of the decade both were showing signs of moving towards the FPÖ’s agenda. Although the cordon sanitaire remained the SPÖ’s official policy, the party’s actual decisions in government, where it controlled the Interior Ministry (the equivalent of the Home Office) suggested it was prepared to take a much harder line on immigration. The ÖVP went even further. It not only continuously sniped at its coalition partner for being a soft touch on the issue; it also officially abandoned its exclusionary approach to the FPÖ. At the 1999 election, the ÖVP’s manifesto

adopted its most restrictive stance on immigration to date (Gruber, 2014, 159-161) and Schüssel refused to rule out any coalition with the radical right.

The result was that the FPÖ achieved its highest result ever, beating the ÖVP, which then invited it into coalition – a move which initially attracted sanctions from the European Union. The first Schüssel cabinet not only brought in but celebrated further restrictions on immigration and introduced a controversial ‘Integration agreement’, compelling new immigrants to pass language and culture tests within the first four years of their arrival (Luther, 2003, 138; Perchinig, 2006, 296-8). These moves, combined with the so-called ‘strategy of embrace’ (*Umarmungsstrategie*) of the radical right initially appeared to pay dividends for the ÖVP in 2002. Finding it difficult – not untypically, perhaps, for a radical party with little recent experience of government – to cope with the cares of office, the FPÖ got tangled up in internal arguments, encouraging Schüssel to call a snap election at which many former FPÖ voters, disillusioned by the party’s squabbles, switched directly to the ÖVP (Picker, Salfinger and Zeglovits, 2004) allowing the ÖVP to achieve what by then was a phenomenal 42.3% while the FPÖ crashed to just 10%.

The ÖVP appeared to have found a solution to its enduring problem with the PRR (Heinisch, 2004, 257-9, Luther, 2003, 144-5). As it turned out, however, that solution was anything but lasting. After re-establishing another government coalition with the now depleted FPÖ, the second Schüssel-cabinet essentially picked up where it left off, further securitizing the debate on immigration by discussing it in terms of international cooperation against crime and terrorism (Gruber, 2014, 161-5). Even more controversial was its approach to asylum: amongst other measures, it restricted the rights of refugee care, it broadened the list of safe third countries and it assigned the private company “European Homecare” for repatriation counselling and organizing the management of asylum seekers in Austria’s main refugee

centre, thereby cutting support for those NGOs that had been stepping into help heretofore (Langthaler and Trauner, 2009, 464). It also actively promoted a restrictive policy in the European Council (Bauböck and Perchinig, 2003, 22) and in 2005 the cabinet presented and then passed a comprehensive and clearly restrictive reform package, including alien and immigration laws but also asylum and citizenship laws (Schuhmacher, 2007).

Electorally, however, this ratcheting up of restrictions did not pay the expected dividend. In 2006, the ÖVP lost to the SPÖ and fell to what by then was regarded as something like its trend rate of 34% of the vote, forcing it into another Grand Coalition which lasted for just two years. And although it used time in office, and in particular its control of the Interior Ministry to maintain tough stances on immigration, integration and asylum, it gained only 26% of the vote at the snap election of 2008, its worst result in the whole post-war era. Meanwhile, the populist radical right had split into two parties in 2005, with many of those who had been in government joining Haider in newly established Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich* or BZÖ), while other supposedly less moderate supporters remained in the FPÖ. But rather than imploding completely, the FPÖ began to recover its strength and vitality. While at the 2006 election, still scarred by their recent struggles and splits, both parties only achieved a combined 15% of the vote, only two years later they were back at a combined 28.2%, and were thus even stronger – and in the FPÖ’s case even more aggressive – than they had been in 1999 when co-opted and supposedly emasculated by being invited into government.

Striking a balance

The six-year experience of a coalition with the populist radical right and the electoral price paid for it left its mark on the ÖVP and prompted something of a rethink on immigration and integration. Although the party’s strategy on asylum has hardly moved, there has been change

in other areas, signalling the end of a purely adaptive approach to the populist radical right. After years of alienating non-governmental organizations, including those traditionally linked to it, by its hard-line asylum policy, the ÖVP began to change its tune on another aspect of immigration politics, namely migrant integration. Under new party leader Joseph Pröll, the ÖVP-led Ministry of the Interior promoted a consultation process that encompassed federal, regional and local political authorities, NGOs, social scientists and economic stakeholders, with the aim of working out a 'National Action Plan for Integration' (Götzelmann, 2010, 200-205). It marked a step back to the semi-corporatist approach Austria had been following for so many decades, with the new ÖVP-leadership now arguing that this approach might have some potential to undermine the populist radical right's hold over the issues concerned.

When Michael Spindelegger took over as ÖVP leader in 2011, he even intensified this new, dual approach by creating a government portfolio for integration – the State Secretariat for Integration (*Staatssekretariat für Integration, SSI*) within the Interior Ministry. Although formally responsible to the latter and provided with only limited financial resources, the logic behind this step quickly became evident. While the SSI, the leadership of which was handed to the 25 year-old youth spokesmen of the ÖVP in Vienna, explicitly limited its task to the 'integration of permanent residents with a migrant background', it left the issues of Asylum and Migration Control almost entirely to the Ministry of the Interior, headed up by Johanna Mikl-Leitner, well-known in the ÖVP as a hardliner on such issues. While the Interior Ministry has maintained its tough stance, especially on asylum, the SSI has organised a myriad of short-range projects together with first steps on the legislative level, rebranding the question of integration under a meritocratic narrative of "individual contribution" (*Leistung*), one of the centre-right's most traditional ideological catch-phrases. Whereas, during its coalition with the FPÖ, the party had focused on cultural measures of "civic integration" based on migrants language skills, country knowledge and adoption of mainstream values, it

now demanded and promoted more active contributions by migrants, such as better educational achievement, more active participation in the labour market and joining associations and institutions (Gruber and Mattes, forthcoming). This narrative fits into the government's recent approach on economic immigration, which has been redesigned as a points-based system. Indeed, by practically limiting labour migration to highly skilled people, specialised personnel and 'key-workers' in sectors of shortage occupation, the immigration regime is pretty much in line with the "best-and-brightest" doctrine that currently characterises the approach of the UK and other Western democracies, even if it receives far less attention in the media than the more contested aspects of asylum and integration.

The ÖVP hoped that its more recent dual track approach would simultaneously satisfy widespread public support for restrictive approaches to immigration, integration and asylum and yet avoid damage to the economy and keep on board liberal and/or compassionate conservatives. If, however, it has achieved this it has done little or nothing to mitigate the threat from the populist radical right. True, the 2013 election saw the BZÖ – deprived of its charismatic leader Haider and unsuccessfully attempting to turn itself into a more mainstream liberal party – lose all its seats in parliament, having just failed to reach the 4% threshold. However, the FPÖ, led by the charismatic Heinz-Christian Strache, climbed to 20.5% (electorally establishing as the strongest amongst European Radical Right parties) and would almost certainly have topped that result, had more than half a million voters not been attracted by two new entrants – Team Stronach for Austria, led by the eponymous ex-pat businessman Frank Stronach, which scored 5.7% and NEOS – the New Austria, which managed 5%. The ÖVP dropped to just 24% - its lowest share of the vote since the war and one only just compensated for by an equally unimpressive performance by the SPÖ, especially given the strong possibility that the ÖVP will be caught in a pincer movement at the next election by NEOS to its liberal left and the FPÖ to its authoritarian right.

Learning the lessons from Austria

In light of the experiences of the Austrian centre-right and its successes and failures in taming the populist radical right, what lessons might we draw when considering how the Conservatives could and should react to the challenge they face from UKIP? Sadly, for Tories out there hoping for a silver bullet solution, they are not so much constructive as something of a counsel of despair.

To begin with, the Austrian experience suggests that treating the populist radical right as some sort of pariah (“a bunch of ... fruitcakes and loonies and closet racists”, as Mr Cameron once put it) is not ultimately a sustainable strategy – particularly if the mainstream party in question finds, as the Conservative Party has found, that its efforts to do so are undermined not only by the media but by people within its own ranks promoting the idea of deals with said pariah. Unfortunately, however, the Austrian experience also suggests that imitating the pariah’s policies and/or bringing it in from the cold is not a particularly successful approach either. It is by no means guaranteed that shifts towards a more restrictive immigration, integration and asylum policy will actually help to recapture lost votes – and they may well scare off other voters, be they liberals of the economic or the social variety. Even worse, there is a distinct possibility – one much discussed in Austria but not sufficiently considered (at least in the media) in Britain – that ‘banging on’ about the radical right’s signature issues, rather than neutralising it, only serves to prime voters to think those issues are even more pressing than they already clearly think they are. If that happens, support for UKIP is likely to rise rather than fall – or at least to stay at a level which will not simply prevent the Conservatives capturing marginals from Labour but may actually assist Labour in capturing marginals from the Conservatives.

And then there is ‘credibility’ – an important political currency on the basis of which parties and politicians are evaluated by voters. Part of this image involves pursuing principles even if current trends might suggest casting them aside. For Cameron and his colleagues, forgetting all about decontamination and responding to UKIP’s recent gains by ‘lurching to the right’ can of course be portrayed as ‘listening to the people’. But it can also look like panic, raising the question, even among voters ill-disposed towards immigration, of why it took UKIP to do so well in polls and second-order elections before the government acted? It is also possible that those voters who have switched to UKIP might pick up on the tactical intent behind this shift and reward UKIP for its influence rather than the Conservatives for caving in. Experience from Austria suggests that drastic shifts on immigration and integration merely increase the electorate’s suspicion that mainstream parties are simply playing politics, making them less likely to believe they really care, let alone have any consistent, deliverable policies on the issue. Austria, especially in recent years, also shows us that trying to have it both ways – talking tough on asylum and ‘bad’ immigration while promoting integration and an open market for highly-skilled workers – may not help the centre-right much in this respect either, at least in the short term. No surprise, then, that the Conservatives’ attempts to do just that seem to have made very little impression on those Tory voters who appear to have jumped ship to UKIP.

Austrian experience also suggests that such shifts stand little chance of converting many of those voters who would vote for radical right parties anyway. Since those parties can make a good claim to ‘own’ the issues of immigration, integration and asylum, adopting their agenda risks confirming rather than eroding their reputation for speaking truth to power. The ÖVP’s experience is unequivocal in this regard. The Conservatives have and will always fail to outbid UKIP when it comes to its core issues, such as immigration or, indeed, the EU, because, like Austria’s populist radical right, it will always be able – and willing – to go one

step further. In fact, every step in its direction will allow UKIP, like the FPÖ, to sell that development as an achievement of its own, demonstrating its ability to influence mainstream parties to ‘do the right thing’, therefore making it worth voting for even if it stands little chance of getting into parliament and government. Meanwhile, if economists who argue that immigration is actually a net positive for the country are correct, then any mainstream party which takes too restrictive a stance is essentially denying both the nation and itself the benefits of higher growth.

But it is not only its consequences for votes and policy that makes such a strategy hazardous, it has consequences for getting into and staying in government too. The ÖVP, operates in a PR system that (above the threshold anyway) directly converts support for the radical right into seats in parliament; thus, if the FPÖ does well enough, as it did for example in 1999, then there is always a possibility of a right-wing coalition. The Conservatives, however, lack such a safety net – one that that might allow them, like some of their sister parties in other parts of Europe, to gain or hang onto power even with a relatively unimpressive vote share. In the (admittedly still unlikely) event that UKIP were to manage to win seats in Westminster at the 2015 election, first past the post would almost certainly see to it that its haul was insufficient to facilitate the formation of a Tory-led coalition or minority government. Turning around the telescope for a moment, the Tories also need to worry about the possibility that cosyng up too closely to UKIP might hamper another deal with the Liberal Democrats, who, unless they really are prepared to be the gift that keeps on giving to their coalition partners, have probably conceded just about as much as they are likely to concede on immigration and on Europe. In the longer run, and assuming, for the sake of argument, that a run of hung parliaments eventually produces irresistible pressure for a change of electoral systems rather than provokes a frustrated electorate to award one of the mainstream parties with a massive

majority simply in order to break the deadlock, the Austrian experience suggests that co-option of the populist radical right is no more than a temporary solution anyway.

Given all this, the obvious lesson from Austria for British Conservatives is a simple one – but no less important for that. They should avoid investing too much time, effort and attention in trying to cure a condition that, in all likelihood, can only be managed. UKIP can hardly be dismissed as a distraction. But nor is it going to be easy to dispose of – not if it continues to be well-led and well-covered by a fascinated (and often friendly) media, and not while there are significant proportions of the electorate uncomfortable with the cultural social and economic changes which globalisation, as well as partisan and class dealignment, make inevitable. After all, UKIP is no anomaly; it is the British example of a Europe-wide phenomenon that no-one has yet found the answer to. A degree of rhetorical reassurance from the Conservatives may help a little – but risks making things even worse if it leads to promises that can't be kept and/or to alienating the many commercial enterprises which thrive on such changes and the many citizens who can cope with them. Better instead to focus instead on what mainstream centre-right parties generally do best – managing the economy, providing public services that are sufficient without being extravagant, balancing the concerns of traditionalist voters with the requirements of business, and painting their centre-left rivals as profligate soft-touches who couldn't organise an alcoholic celebration in a factory producing beer.

Mention of the latter brings us neatly to the only other thing that might help the Conservatives – a change of leader. Studies of the electorate (Ford and Goodwin, 2014) and Tory Party members (Webb and Bale, forthcoming), strongly suggest that many of those tempted by UKIP are at least in part influenced by a feeling that David Cameron is an out-of-touch liberal, too far-removed from their idea of what a Conservative leader should be. To do

anything about this in the short-term would be madness: it would look like panic and, in any case, it would be to ignore the fact that, to many other voters anyway, Cameron is a much more credible Prime Minister than any of his current rivals, inside or outside his own party. If and when he steps down, however, choosing a successor whose background, instincts and demeanour are, shall we say, a little earthier than Mr Cameron's might make things harder for UKIP than they have been lately.

Conclusion

The recent successes of UKIP in local and European elections have stimulated debate on its impact on established parties. Although the future of UKIP is anything but clear, general election results since the 1970s suggest that, in fits and starts, British voters are falling out of love with the big two and are willing to see smaller parties as viable options. Something similar happened in Austria from the 1980s onwards, although the effects there, partly because of the country's PR electoral system, have been even more pronounced. They have led to an extensive transformation of the party system, establishing a successful populist radical right presence that has put pressure on Austrian mainstream parties, in particular the centre-right People's Party (ÖVP). Until recently, the British Conservative Party has been shielded from, if not completely immune to, similar pressure. Recent shifts in immigration, integration and asylum policy, however, suggest a willingness not just to take a traditionally tougher stance than its mainstream Labour rival but also to engage in more explicit competition with its radical right rival. This article argues that the ÖVP's experience should encourage the Tories to think very carefully indeed before going too far down that particular road.

Outbidding Labour – a familiar Conservative strategy – is one thing. But different rules apply when it comes to UKIP, a party unconstrained by a progressive tradition or, indeed, the

likelihood of having to put its promises into practice. As the ÖVP found to its cost, challenging the populist radical right on its own pitch and playing by its rules raises the salience of its core issues, helps to legitimise its sometimes irrational assertions and assumptions, and encourages it simply to demand even more. For British Conservatives the consequences are, if anything, even more worrying. The number of UKIP voters or sympathisers in crucial constituencies who might be won round to the Conservative cause is quite small – almost certainly too small to help the Tories win an overall majority at Westminster in 2015. Moreover, without the safety-net of a potential centre-right/radical-right-coalition (an option most of its continental sister parties have to hand), the Conservatives' play for the populist vote is effectively an uninsured adventure holiday – one that not only risks harming rather than boosting the party's chances of winning an overall majority but also handicapping a sluggish British economy in a period of European economic crisis. Given the careful efforts to reshape the Tory brand during Cameron's time in opposition, the Party's recent relapse into anti-immigration populism gives the lie to talk of 'decontamination' and risks reviving the old image of the 'nasty party'. However, with an even 'nastier' party now on the scene, this relapse could come at a high price. Populist radical right parties like UKIP will always be able to up the ante, and trying to adopt their rhetoric and their policies, while it may be tempting in the short term, is not a long term solution to eliminating or at least minimizing the threat they pose. Indeed it may be a fool's errand. Whether the Conservatives are capable of learning the lessons from overseas examples in general, and Austria in particular, remains to be seen.

¹ Consociational democracies are characterised by a government that is vitally linked to elite cartels, dedicated to stabilising a fragmented political culture (Lijphart 1969, p. 216). As a consequence, political conflicts are moderated by compromise or amicable agreement amongst elites and government officials, leading to depoliticization of contentious issues.

Government itself tends towards Grand Coalitions that strive for proportionality in the distribution of government jobs and resources.

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