

THINK PIECE: HOW TO DEAL WITH THE FAR RIGHT?

The governments of Western Europe are confronted with the rise of the extreme right. Their concern has been how to deal with the phenomenon. The answers have differed widely based upon different traditions of nationhood and social, political, economic and institutional factors. Two principal strategies have emerged.

Strategy One. All political parties agree to form a ‘cordon sanitaire’ – a firewall – around the extreme right to prevent it from capturing power (Belgium).

Strategy Two. Power sharing – formation of a coalition with the extreme right (Austria).

Arguments pro and contra

I. The ‘cordon sanitaire’ school offers four arguments. (a) Co-operation with the far right legitimises its ideology which is inherently anti-democratic. (b) Lessons from history. Extreme right parties come to power through democratic elections but as soon as they gain enough power they act to curtail and limit democracy. If one judges a party to be incompatible with democracy, why give it the opportunity to use state resources? (c) Dangers of populism. Leaders of extreme right-wing parties are charismatic, opportunistic and unscrupulous. They may look like democrats but are profoundly antagonistic to democracy. (d) Left and right parties are sharing the same basic values, i.e. respect for rules and institutions common to the democratic arena. Those values demand a ‘cordon sanitaire’ against parties that do not share these underlying values.

II. The case for power-sharing with the extreme right rests upon the following four arguments. (a) Democrats have to respect the basic principles of democracy. If part of the electorate in a given country regards the far right as their legitimate representative, then this party should be allowed to take part in government. Moreover, as long as the far right is respecting the rules of the democratic game it might not be wise to exclude them since this would undermine democracy as such. (b) Governance means compromising, especially in a coalition government. There is no reason to believe that the same rule does not apply to extreme right-wing parties. (c) Most extreme right-wing parties are seeking power – mainly at local level. Once in power they find out that the execution of their programme is unattainable and become more moderate. (d) The electoral success of extreme parties most likely fades away once they are in government, because their voters tend to be anti-establishment. This argument seems to be supported by the fact that extreme right-wing parties have been able to increase their votes whenever confronted with a firewall.

CONCLUSION

Both strategies rest on valid arguments but all depends on the political landscape in each country. That is why tailor-made strategies would be more suitable to address the rise of the far right – or is there a European solution to the problem?