

Charlemagne | Migration migraine

Immigration is a Europe-wide concern. It is not clear, though, that it needs a European solution



THE young man from Senegal was one of roughly 20,000 who have arrived so far this year in Spain's Canary Islands, trying to reach Europe. The waters around the Canaries are becoming a humanitarian disaster. Thousands drown before they reach the shore of the closest part of Europe to west Africa, almost 1,000 miles (1,600km) away. But the young man was not deterred. If he got the chance, he said, he would try again tomorrow.

All round Europe immigrants are, literally, dying to get in. Many Europeans say that immigration is an "important" or "extremely important threat". Managing immigration is now "the greatest challenge facing all European governments", according to John Reid, Britain's home secretary. Nicolas Sarkozy, interior minister and presidential candidate, has launched a get-tough campaign that may push the issue up the agenda in next year's French presidential election. This summer's break-up of the Dutch coalition was triggered by disputes over the tough policy of the immigration minister, Rita Verdonk.

The causes of these worries range from xenophobia to terrorism and the perceived failure of multiculturalism. But one is simply that people believe immigration to be out of control. The Canaries took in more boat people in August than in the whole of 2005. In May 2004, when eight central European countries joined the European Union, the British government blithely said that some 13,000 workers would arrive each year from the new members. In fact, 25 times as many did, leaving the government looking incompetent as well as complacent. Not surprisingly, people believe not just that the number of immigrants is growing exponentially but that governments cannot stop it.

There is only a certain amount that any reasonable government can do. Nobody suggests building great walls like China's to keep the hordes out. Civilised governments cannot forcibly deport millions of illegal entrants (though Italy has been accused of sometimes doing this). Every rich country, America included, is under the same sort of pressure as Europe. It is also worth stressing that governments should not try to stop all immigration, even if they could. Immigrants own and run shops, serve in restaurants and staff hospitals (many of the doctors and nurses who work in Britain's health service have trained abroad).

Yet for all these positive arguments, the backlash against legal and, especially, illegal immigration seems likely to grow if the

subject is ignored. That makes it all the more crucial that governments do what they can. The worry is that their efforts so far may in some respects have made things worse.

Some countries are serial granters of amnesties. Last year Spain decided to let illegal immigrants remain provided that were working for at least six months. Italy also likes amnesties, arguing that they encourage black-market workers to pay taxes. At the same time, other countries have become tougher. In France riot police recently evicted 500 people, mostly illegal immigrants from west Africa, from an abandoned dormitory in a university near Paris. There was a similar incoherence when the EU expanded to central Europe. Britain, Ireland and Sweden opened up their labour markets to new workers. The other EU countries imposed restrictions to try to keep them out.

In a world of separate labour markets and national border controls, differing policies might just reflect different national choices. But Europeans are free to travel, live and work wherever they want. In half the EU countries (those in the Schengen passport-free zone) there aren't even any border controls. The right of free movement of labour is one of the EU's undoubted successes. But it has a downside: if Italy (say) grants illegal immigrants an amnesty, they are free to disappear over the Alps to France or Germany—and many do just that.

In these circumstances, immigration policies are not merely different, they are contradictory. It makes little sense, from a European point of view, for France to get tough on illegal immigrants if Spain is granting an amnesty. This produces confusion at the European level, making it harder to manage legal migration (and properly managed legal migration may be the best single cure for illegal migration).

Europe's incoherence also leads to what is known as "squeezing the balloon". A crackdown on immigration in one place swiftly produces a huge bulge somewhere else. The flood of immigrants to the Canaries reflects a tightening of the border at Gibraltar. One reason 750,000 Poles and other central Europeans went to Britain and Ireland after 2004 is that they were hampered from working legally in other big EU countries. The most likely successor to Britain's Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, now says he wants to limit access to Britain's labour market for people from the next two EU entrants, Bulgaria and Romania.

A job for Europe

In response to such beggar-my-neighbour actions, the leaders of France, Italy and Spain this week proposed to increase the European Union's competence in immigration policy. They have a good case. And like immigrants themselves, they are pushing at an open door: unsurprisingly, the European Commission would graciously accept more powers over immigration.

Nobody disputes that European countries need better co-ordination. It is not obvious, though, that this must mean passing authority up to Brussels. Immigration touches on the most basic concepts of nationhood, such as when immigrants may become citizens. Citizenship, like other such matters, is rightly a prerogative of member countries, not the EU.

The best role for the EU should be to help governments co-operate, not to usurp national powers. And one aim should be to persuade Europeans that immigration is not, as they think, dangerously out of control. Aligning national policies might provide some reassurance. A big row about the powers of Brussels would only make matters worse. ■