

The Center Is Not Holding

by Michael Curtis

It is a hyperbolic overstatement to say that the center cannot hold and mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, but it is fair to recognize that the tectonic plates of European politics are shifting. In one week in November- December 2016 this actuality was illustrated by electoral results in France and Italy, and to a lesser extent in Austria.

In France after the victory on November 28, 2016 of Francois Fillon to be the candidate of the right wing Republic party in the 2017 presidential election, and the growing popularity of Marine Le Pen the leader and candidate of the far right Front National, the incumbent socialist President Francois Holland declared he would not compete in the presidential election. The public opinion polls indicate that since Fillon and Le Pen are leading, a socialist candidate, whether Prime Minister Manuel Valls, or someone else is unlikely to get to the second round, let alone win.

In Italy, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi faced a crisis over referendum that was defeated by 55% to 45% on Sunday December 4, 2016. The 41 year old center-left Renzi wanted by a complex referendum to change the constitutional system by which both chambers of parliament had virtually equal powers, and often blocked legislation. Renzi proposed limiting the power of the Senate, thus facilitating the legislative process, and reduce the power of Italy's regional governments, thus providing stronger central government.

The complex referendum, not easily understood by voters, in essence became one on Renzi and his leadership, and on Italian nationalism. For some voters implicitly expressing unhappiness with the EU, the vote was in favor of Exit Italia, the Italian version of Brexit. More important, it showed, as has been the

case in other European countries, opposition to immigration. So far in 2016 Italy has taken in 171,000 migrants.

The referendum was primarily opposed by the left leaning Five Star Movement (M5S), by the far right Northern League, and to some extent by the center right Forza Italia. The M5S, founded in 2009 and led by former comedian turned politician Beppe Grillo, who wants Italy to abandon the euro, is a populist, anti-establishment, environmental group. He sees Italy as a "country stuck in the mud." In the 2013 parliamentary election it gained the second highest number of votes, and won 109 of the 630 parliamentary deputies. The M5S has done well in mayoral elections throughout Italy, as well as in parliamentary elections.

The right wing Northern League founded in 1991 wants Italy to become a federal state, and sometimes called for the north to secede and form its own system. It gets about 4 % of the poll.

The advances of the far right in European politics however were halted on December 4, 2016 with the defeat of Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the far right Freedom party, as a candidate to become president of Austria. A victory would have been symbolically important, making him the first far right politician to become head of state in a European country since the end of World War II. Nevertheless, his relatively strong performance will be an encouragement to his own party and also to similar nationalist ones seeking power in other countries.

Norbert Hofer had almost won the presidency in May 2016 obtaining 49.7% of the vote when his opponent Green party candidate Alexander Van der Bellen obtained 50.3 %, an advantage of 30,800 votes. However, because of irregularities in postal ballots in 94 of 117 districts the election result was declared invalid and a rerun was held on December 4, 2016.

The Austrian Freedom party was founded in 1955 by a former

general in the Nazi SS and has a history of antisemitism. Today, some members of the party wear blue-cornflower on their clothes, a symbol of German nationalism that was used by Nazi Germans as a secret symbol.

The chair of the party since 2005, Heinz-Christian Strache, is a populist, far right politician, more extreme than Hofer. In April 2012, he posted on Facebook a caricature of a Jewish banker with hooked nose. He called Nazi death camps "punishment facilities." He has attacked German Chancellor Angela Merkel for allowing an unlimited number of migrants into Europe. His platform states, "the uncontrolled influx of migrants alien to our culture who seep into our social welfare system...makes civil war in the medium-term not unlikely."

Presidential candidate Hofer is a 45 year old former aeronautical engineer who carries both a walking stick as a result of a paragliding accident in 2003, and a pistol on him. Like Marine Le Pen and unlike Strache, Hofer distanced himself from antisemitism, past and present.

Hofer's policy is similar to other European far right groups: anti-immigration, fear of Islamic terrorism, anti-elite, opposition to globalization, and emphasis on national identity. One of his main slogans in his electoral campaign resembles similar rhetoric in the 2016 US presidential campaign: "Your homeland needs you now." Vienna, he declares, must not become Istanbul. As a strong nationalist, Hofer expresses concern about Turkey and Turks entering Austria. He expresses concern about Turkey, and Turks entering Austria.

If elected he would have called for a referendum on membership of the EU, and for South Tyrol (Alto Adige), which became under Italian control in 1919, and has been an autonomous province since 1948, to be incorporated into Austria. Even more strongly he argued that Islam is not part of Austrian values, and that criminal penalties should be imposed on immigrants committing crimes like rape.

This attempt to limit immigration of Muslim into Europe comes a moment when the belief that Muslims may not be part of the national community is understandable. A poll in UK in December 2016 shows that Muslims in the country live in enclaves on their own housing estates, have their own schools, and TV channels. Paradoxically, the report criticizes the British police for “pandering” to ethnic minorities.

43% of Muslims in the country want at least some aspects of Sharia law to be in force and to replace British law. It is disconcerting that a considerable number of Muslims in UK believe conspiracy theories. Some 31% believe that the US government and 7 % believe that Jews were responsible for the 9/11 attacks in US. Only 4% blamed al Qaeda for the terrorist attack on the US.

Many other European countries have seen electoral gains by far right and nationalist parties. They include Switzerland (Swiss People’s Party with 29%), Hungary (Jobbik with 21%), Denmark (Danish People’s Party 21%), Netherlands (Freedom Party 10%), Greece (Golden Dawn 7%). Even in Germany the far right Alternative for Germany party (AfD) in September 2016 got 14% of the vote in the Berlin state election, entering that state parliament for the first time. Indeed, the AfD is now represented in 10 out of Germany’s 16 state parliaments.

In all these countries there is revolt and popular anger against what is seen as the elite and the centrist politics of the country. The populist backlash that took Trump to the White House and Britain out of the European Union is continuing. President Trump and his administration must formulate policy in the light of the growing populist strength in Europe and the growth of anti-system, extremist nationalist parties.