



Nicholas Allen

This Time it's serious

Recent events in Austria have had that rare effect of bringing the country onto the front pages of newspapers around the world. The turbulence both within and outside Austria is considerable and has left nobody here cold. Through my work I come into close contact with quite a spectrum of people around the country and for some weeks now the impending entry of Dr Haider and/or his party into the government has inevitably been our prime topic of discussion. Partly because it might be of interest to others and partly to bring order to my own thoughts on the subject, I decided to have a go at my own analysis.

This analysis will fall into two sections: the first being a glance at the historical and social perspective over the last 50 years that has led to this situation. The second section will be a layman's considerations as to what can best be done to contain both the damage done and Dr Haider.

In 1945, in the wake of Yalta and the shock of the Endkampf, a generation of Austrian politicians emerged from jails and camps determined to make a new start. Both socialists and conservatives remembered the polarisation of the early thirties which led to civil war and bloodshed in 1934 and subsequently left the country so debilitated that Hitler had no problem establishing his authority over Austria in 1938.

These leaders set about forging a new state, a new spirit in 1945. On the one hand no effort was spared in assimilating former Nazis into the new political parties on the premise that they could thus be better integrated and do less harm than if they were to become a political force of their own. On the other hand no attempt was made to come to terms with Austria's share of the responsibility for the Third Reich; here, welcome support came in the guise of the Yalta declaration. As a result, awareness of Austria's role between 1938 and 1945 was reduced to a minimum. This was to lead to turbulence in 1986 when Kurt Waldheim was elected president. The one beneficial aspect of that period was that it led to a greater awareness of the past throughout the country.

The immediate post-war politicians were determined never to let civil strife happen again and so the conservatives and socialists devised an intricate system of "social partnership". Practically every political and economic decision was taken in consensus between the partners. To ensure success the majority of industry and trade was kept in state hands and every job, post and position was awarded according to strict codes of equality and balance of power. By the eighties Austria was an efficient, peaceful and wealthy country, albeit stultified, only waiting for the end of communism for it to be able to join the European Union. Despite occasional rebellions, despite periods of one-party government, this "partnership" lasted from 1945 until 2000. Fifty-five years is a long time in politics, it is even longer for one "idea" to reign supreme and unquestioned. The majority of those ruling were

undoubtedly beyond reproach, even if Austria had its fair share of corruption scandals, but the nation had grown weary of the system and longed for change.

During the early fifties a group of ex-Nazis and ex-Nationalists formed a party of their own: the "Freedom" party. Throughout the coming decades they were to remain a small, impotent group except for a short period when Bruno Kreisky in 1970/71 used them as support for his minority government; in return he promised them an electoral system that would improve their chances in parliament. Despite participation in a coalition during the early eighties they remained insignificant, impeccably behaved until, in 1986, in an overnight coup in Innsbruck, Jörg Haider was elected leader.

As a young politician Dr Haider had already impressed with his intelligence, his wit and his ability plausibly to change his opinions on any subject to suit his own purposes. During the next ten years he turned the small party into a powerful focus of general discontent, using his considerable charisma and rhetorical powers for the purpose, mocking those in power, promising all and sundry a place in a paradise. Austrians weary of the system began to heed his message of salvation.

You might ask why anyone should believe him. Austria was a respected member of the European Union, prosperous, industrious and successful. Why should there be any discontent for him to manipulate? The answer lies in that "social partnership" of socialist and conservative forces forged in 1945. No political force can rule for over fifty years without degenerating, losing its impetus and the support of the people.

In Britain, political discontent results in periodic upheavals during which one party is ousted from power whilst another is installed. Those ousted then have their years in the wilderness to renew their energy, their strength. The Austrian system of proportional representation makes it well-nigh impossible for any party to have an outright majority. This was still possible after the war with only two major parties, but with three of about equal size, there existed the perfect recipe for stalemate. Austrians had grown tired of the political infiltration at all levels, had a legitimate longing for change. But to what? The only thing holding the socialist conservative coalition together once Austria had joined the EU was united opposition to Dr Haider and all he stood for. So the "Unholy Alliance" ruled on in fatal complacency whilst Dr Haider went from strength to strength. The more those in power ignored him, sent him to Coventry, the more support he gained from a populace sick of the bickering between those whose job it was to rule.

With the elections of autumn 1999 discontent had become so widespread that Dr Haider was able to gain second place, with nearly a third of the national vote. Dr Haider had played upon the fears of what he likes to call "simple folk" so that, more and more, they saw him as their messiah (use to the term deliberately) and left the socialists in droves. The election campaign was a horrendous mix of economic promises and shameless manipulation of latent xenophobia. Nevertheless a large percentage of the vote for Haider was one against the old system rather than for what Haider propagated; such a vote was the only means of protest.

The attempts to reform the conservative-socialist coalition after the elections was made harder by the evident personal antipathy between Dr Schüssel, the conservative leader and Chancellor Klima, head of the socialist party. Two unwilling partners struggled half-heartedly to maintain their alliance against

Dr Haider. But in the Conservative party there were powerful undercurrents longing for a change that would enable them to emerge from their underdog role of second-best; these forces believed their salvation lay in the hands of Dr Haider, who – for appearances sake – would relinquish the role of chancellor in favour of Dr Schüssel.

It is these forces that have won, that have led to the socialists going into opposition and a new coalition of Conservative–Freedom forces.

I would like briefly to refer to this xenophobia in Austria. I have no wish to justify it, and abhor it in all its forms. I have also worked throughout my career to plea for tolerance and understanding as a real alternative. However, the Austrian plains have been a battleground for armies and ideologies since time immemorial, being exposed at the very heart of Europe, a crossroads. This is, perhaps, the reason for the fear of the invader, the fear of the unknown, the lack of self-certainty (unlike the British, for example, on their island). Landlocked, these dwellers of the plain, together with the introverted mountain folk in their narrow valleys, all tended to look inwards and contrived to remain blissfully unaware of the truth that it was precisely the unbelievable ethnic mix which made Vienna such a unique city. Only in Vienna of 1900 could a Hitler form his fateful mix of xenophobia that was to lead the world close to destruction.

There is a dedicated strand of liberal-thinking people in the Austrian fibre, but they have never gained real power in the face of autocratic Catholicism, Habsburg Imperialism and institutionalised Socialism. These people have struggled to uphold the liberal banner in schools and universities, but the outside forces have always proved too strong in the long run.

Now we have the situation – the world up in arms around us, threats coming in from all sides. These are justified, given six factors regarding Dr Haider:

he has publicly addressed former SS veterans as "dear and honourable friends", referring to them as "decent" people.

he has referred to concentration camps as penal camps.

he has publicly praised Hitler's job-creating policies.

he has compared Winston Churchill unfavourably with Adolf Hitler.

he has referred to politicians and governments in Europe and elsewhere in a tone not usually used in international affairs.

Any apology ever made by Dr Haider has always been half-hearted and qualified, the apology of the small boy, reluctantly doing as he has been ordered.

The problem is that the more Austria is threatened, the more Austrians will close ranks. If an election were held tomorrow, Dr Haider might well gain an overall majority. Despite his Nazi parentage I do not believe him to be a Nazi; I do, however, believe him to be a fascistoid populist and a demagogue, unscrupulous in his path to, and use of, power.

There is no way the old coalition could be brought back to life, it is questionable whether that would be desirable. Too great a reaction against

Austria might destabilise a society at the heart of the EU with damaging effect throughout the community. Of course this is an internal matter of EU-wide concern and Austria cannot bury its head in the sand. But, at the same time, I cannot imagine the British or the French accepting EU advice in the forming of their government, either!

Given that the new government will have a parliamentary majority of some 55 percent of the electorate, it may well be necessary to let them take office and prove by their deeds that the international reaction was uncalled-for. This is a risky strategy, one that could backfire but I see it as the only viable way. And remember, at least 45 percent of the electorate are actively appalled by what lies ahead! So no one should write off Austria and the Austrians as neo-Nazis. There just doesn't seem to be any alternative.

Let the EU, let the international community warn Austria and Dr Haider. Hopefully the Austrians will take the uproar seriously, however tempted they may be to dismiss it. Let the EU monitor Austria's every action closely and comment loudly and clearly upon these actions if they be deemed unacceptable. Let Dr Haider's charisma be put to the test of having to wield power, as opposed to merely opposing. (Whether or not he is in the government, let there be no doubt that the real power lies with him, Dr Schüssel remaining a puppet on a string for him to manipulate at will).

In the mean time we may hope that the erstwhile great Austrian Socialist party will use its time in opposition to regenerate, then to re-emerge as the true voice of the people, showing them that they can offer more than any "Pied Piper". Is this too much to hope? For any of us who care, this cannot be a time to resign or to emigrate. Surely we must now redouble our efforts to show that there is another, more human set of values waiting to be applied to the problems besetting us all.

The situation is truly serious. Only the Austrians can prevent it from becoming desperate as well. We need all the help we can get from the international community to succeed.

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