Immigration and the right balance

IN THE SOCIAL SYSTEM WE NEED MORE THAN TRANSFER PAYMENTS, WE NEED INFRASTRUCTURE

Irish scholar Bryan Fanning praises the country for preventing ideological debates on immigration. He believes this helps to combat radicalisation. However, he adds that the recent wave of refugees is creating potential for protest. In his opinion, the task now is to reduce the numbers, while at the same time welcoming immigrants and taking into account the needs of as many Irish people as possible.

*The interview was conducted by Dr. Dirk Bornschein**

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Dr. Bryan Fanning is a Professor of Migration and Social Policy at University College Dublin. Alongside his work at UCD, Dr. Fanning's research has focused on immigration in Ireland and the social policy surrounding the issue. Dr. Fanning has contributed to many publications on immigration, including a recent book, ‘Diverse Republic’, along with an approaching publication ‘Migration and Social Policy in a Changing World: histories, challenges and dilemmas’.

Dirk Bornschein: When you think about the migration in your country, where do you see the deep roots in your country's debate on migration?

Bryan Fanning: Let me start with my research puzzle about the Irish case over the past few decades. One of my questions is: why is Ireland relatively open to immigration? And why hasn't immigration become as politicized as in many other European countries? These are big questions. Generally, when we think about migration and its impact on Irish society, social policy, and law, there are lots of similarities with other European countries. But something has been different: up until the late 1950s, the country experienced large-scale emigration, with generations upon generations reducing the population. Emigration was seen as a societal failure. At that time, the country was dominated by a fairly isolationist nationalism, centered on Irish identity, Irish language, and Irish culture, a consequence of decolonization from Britain. But from that moment on, Ireland embarked on a nation-building project with proactive economic development, dismantling tariff barriers, and so on, turning Ireland into perhaps the most globalized and open economy in the world.

Was this new understanding immediately accompanied by a significant increase in immigration?

Fanning: No, immigration was linked to a period of economic boom that led to the "Celtic Tiger" in the 1990s. And although the Celtic Tiger came to an end with the devastating economic collapse in 2008, which led to many profound economic problems, for example in connection with the housing market, immigration is still seen as positive for economic growth in the elite debate. So, the private sector generally has a positive attitude toward immigration. That is important too.

Are there other deep roots for the specific Irish immigration debate?

Fanning: Ireland's economic modernization happened alongside secularization and social modernization, with increasingly high levels of education by international standards and urbanization. I think we created a population that was perhaps more drawn to cosmopolitan ideas than to very isolationist ones. David Goodhart in the UK distinguishes between the winners and losers of this kind of global economy, but Ireland has a large enough middle class. Quite a lot of people benefited economically from globalization and the growth of the Irish economy. All these factors contribute to a sense that immigration isn't normally perceived as a threat.

In this context, a possible Irish cultural nationalism may have been hampered by the Northern Ireland conflict. Irish politicians see, more than some other European politicians, the dangers of ethno-nationalism and the exaggeration of a very strong, essentialist identity. This brought most of the political parties on board. They basically all want to avoid extremism in political discourse.

And the mass media, do they play a role…

Fanning: *In the mainstream media, not on social media where different things happen, they're still very reticent to engage in any form of anti-immigrant rhetoric. There's a kind of political public morality at play here, or indeed the cultural enforcement of certain norms, and that has served them well.*

But there are other dimensions: Ireland's particular political system, which uses proportional representation, has made it very hard for extremist candidates to win seats. Irish politicians on the far right haven't had those breakthroughs, unlike in countries like Germany. They're still seen as marginal figures and poll very, very poorly.

And this is because, with our multi-seat constituencies, other candidates who aren't single-issue anti-immigrant candidates but broader anti-establishment candidates can still scoop up a chunk of the vote in a four- or five-seat constituency.

Could you please explain this in detail?

Fanning: Again, a typical parliamentary constituency in Ireland would have four or five seats. So, let's say three parties get one or two seats each. Voters who are unhappy with these mainstream political parties might vote for an independent candidate with a very strong local connection, who basically talks about all the issues that aren't being framed by the mainstream political parties. And some of what these independent candidates say might sound a bit ethno-nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-asylum seeker in particular, but such candidates are also focused on a wide range of local issues. Single-issue anti-immigrant or far-right candidates would find it difficult to compete with these kinds of locally-connected independent candidates.

Some far-right parties try to appeal to a form of Irish cultural nationalism that has long since been displaced from the Irish mainstream as a result of the economic and social modernization that followed it in the 1950s and 1960s. The likelihood of far-right candidates breaking through using a traditional ethno-nationalist playbook until recently appeared to be slim.

Until recently means, that this is about to change?

Fanning: I wouldn't be overly optimistic forever, because the signs that our nation state and our national media, our national television, are giving us show that many things have been lost and thrown off balance by globalization. That's why I thought there was a danger in the last elections that a form of the extreme right would be more strongly represented than it actually was. However, in recent years Irish far right parties and groups have been able to access large audiences online. Social media has facilitated a globalised diffusion of far-right ideas. And to some extent the Irish far-right online propaganda has become indistinguishable from other English-speaking countries.

How did the rather disappointing election outcome for the far right come about?

Fanning: I attribute this primarily to the complacency of the established political parties. At the same time, with a few exceptions and very brief periods, the issue of immigration has been at the bottom of the political agenda. At the moment, it is relatively high on the agenda again, particularly in connection with the housing issue.

Societies have their own cultural dynamics. How does the attitude toward immigration relate to these dynamics in Ireland?

Fanning: That is another aspect of this story that I have focused on in recent years. Ireland has experienced a series of political milestones in which very progressive political decisions have been made—perhaps late for us compared to some other countries, but early compared to others.

In 2015, we had a constitutional referendum whereby a significant majority of people voted for same-sex marriage. And a few years later, we're basically allowing abortion finally. What you're seeing here in both those referenda, the majority prefer a progressive agenda. When I look at all of that, that's all a positive enough story.

You said, positive enough…

Fanning: Well, the major parties and the smaller progressive parties have focused their efforts mainly on urban, well-educated, progressive voters. In doing so, they've lost sight of about 30% of the electorate who are perhaps more conservative, tend to live in rural areas rather than cities, and are older rather than younger. These people seem to be ignored. In many countries there's a problem with the "left behind" – urban people who feel dispossessed, some categories of the poor working class who feel that the progressive parties no longer do class politics—and all of this gets woven into a nationalist movement. Fortunately, nobody has managed to truly do that in Ireland yet. We only have a number of fragmented far-right groups that don't perform well electorally, but there is nevertheless potential and therefore a risk. The mainstream parties should show that they have the capacity to manage the fairly rapid changes we're going through, including housing and infrastructure.

We started with the roots of the debate. What is the current public debate actually about? And where do you see the fault lines in this migration debate?

Fanning: In Ireland, as in many other countries, including Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and several other European countries, there was an unexpected increase in migration following the pandemic. Then, we took in lots of people through the international protection process, a lot of these would have been migrants from countries like Albania, who wanted to move for employment and to make better lives of themselves, but they're using the internet, the refugee route in the absence of other ways of doing it.

And on top of that, there's the war in Ukraine, which led to Ireland taking in a very large number of people. You know, the Republic of Ireland has a population of about five million, right? But it took in well over 130,000 Ukrainians in a pretty short amount of time. When the crisis began, the Irish government—like some other European countries—acted quickly and offered strong, unconditional support to Ukrainians coming in, using the European Temporary Protection Directive. That allowed welfare payments to be made right away to Ukrainians upon arrival. But very soon after the war began, something like a quarter of all hotel rooms in Ireland were being rented out to refugees—often in small towns that rely heavily on tourism.

And from then on, parts of society changed their attitude?

Fanning: Yeah, but that wasn't really the case with the Ukrainians. Things became more politicized when it came to non-white refugees from other countries, especially when they were young men arriving without families. That's when you started to see the issue becoming political in a number of small towns, getting a lot of media attention—and even more so, going viral on social media.

Take an example—sometimes the government would decide to rent out a hotel in a small town and move in, say, 60 men, without really informing the local community. People would only find out the night before. Then far-right groups and bloggers would show up with their phones, recording everything. And suddenly, their videos are getting a million views online, with talk of the 'plantation of Ireland,' a so-called 'new colonization,' or even the 'destruction' of Irish communities. On the internet, it all plays out like some massive drama

What we've seen over the past couple of years is the refugee issue becoming politicized in Ireland in a way it really hasn't been since around 1999. Right now, one of the biggest drivers of the far right might actually be this growing sense that the state just isn't able to meet the needs of local communities. And when that happens, people start to feel like it's a zero-sum game—like it's either us or them.

The political response of governments, therefore, plays an important role in shaping the response of the population.

Fanning: It's often the social democratic countries that take the toughest stance on asylum seekers—Denmark comes to mind. Thankfully, in Ireland, social policy hasn't been heavily politicized. Though housing is one area that's definitely heading in that direction, because right now Ireland just isn't building enough homes—not even for young people with decent jobs and fairly good salaries.

But if you go back to the period after the war in Ukraine—especially about a year in—there was a real sense that the state was struggling to cope. And that's when anti-immigrant sentiment started to rise, particularly toward international protection applicants who were arriving in Ireland alongside the Ukrainians.

This is really a question of political capacity—the ability to deal with a real and complex challenge. But then the other question is: how was it communicated politically?

Fanning: A lot of what happens in the Irish political system takes place beneath the surface. Political parties don't tend to make big, ideologically charged statements about social cohesion or about being left or right. Instead, there's more of a gradually emerging consensus. So, in a way, the state has tried to get a better handle on the refugee issue—mainly by reducing the numbers coming in. But it's done so without the kind of ideological rhetoric you often hear in the UK, where they're constantly saying things like, 'We will stop the boats.'

Instead, Ireland has introduced slightly stricter measures here and there. There’s a clear intention to send the message that Ireland isn’t an easy destination for asylum seekers at the moment. A few people are deported by plane, and that’s made sure to get media coverage. At the same time, though, the state has started building its own infrastructure, rather than continuing to rely solely on private hotels to house asylum seekers.

In this way, they managed to slow the growth of an anti-immigration far-right?

Fanning: Indeed, by international standards, we haven´t really seen anything of a breakthrough of the far right, although in some local councils, there are a few people elected as independent candidates. But the refugee issue has become politicized, as well as the housing issue is likely to become increasingly politicized. And we're facing the risk of a recession. Ireland is quite exposed to Trump's economic policies, because we're very globalized. There's a lot going on here at the moment. But immigration, you know, it seems as if it has only been the big political issue for a very short time.

But as I always say to people who ask me for my opinion: we have to imagine the 21st century as a time of ongoing migration crises, in which there will be further wars that we cannot foresee, and further displacements. We cannot simply assume that the system is designed to take in a few thousand people, as was previously the case with our refugee system. Suddenly, we may be confronted with 50 times as many people.

We really need to make realistic plans for the future, contingency plans. The state must be able to take in more international asylum seekers than we were used to a few years ago, and we have to deal with larger numbers, and we have to do that within Europe as well.

D*o you see Ireland as a country with a well-developed social welfare system?*

Fanning: I would say that we currently have a higher level of transfer payments compared to the United Kingdom. If you are young and unemployed, you receive more money from the state. However, compared to many social democratic or Christian democratic countries in Europe, our infrastructure and services are rather poor.

We are very wealthy due to the volume of business that passes through us, whether it be from large IT companies, the pharmaceutical industry, or other sectors, but we are still lagging behind in terms of our infrastructure. So, the problem lies in the infrastructure and the inability of the Irish system to make good use of it, and this is where the zero-sum games will play out.

And the immigrants...

Fanning: They receive transfer payments, but the international protection applicants are allowed to work after six months. That's a reform that came before the pandemic. NGOs said it was inhuman to have people in a system waiting for decisions for years without being able to work.

You are currently working on a book that focuses on the social systems. It´s called "Migration and Social Policy in a Changing World, Histories, Challenges, Dilemmas".

Fanning: Yes, it will be published in January. It's looking at the world's systems and how the world responds to refugees. I am simplifying now, but in the Global South, the UNHCR, or UNRWA, before the war, builds infrastructure, it provides welfare systems to people that are often different from and better than those available in Global South countries. So, these countries tend not to see refugees as a drain on their welfare systems because they don't have such systems.

There are countries such as Turkey that have a kind of basic social system, i.e., basic public health care and basic education. Refugees who are housed by the UN or the Red Crescent receive transfer payments from the European Union, and they have access to schools, infrastructure, and services. In other words, even there, refugees are not a financial burden on the welfare state. They are not seen as competition.

In Denmark or Germany, the situation is different.

Fanning: In the Global North, especially in the European Union, we do transfer payments. They can be fine if you give people money and they find accommodation. But what happens when there is simply not enough housing for the arriving refugees? As a rule, their arrival is not accompanied by new infrastructure, such as specially created accommodation or housing solutions. Instead, people simply receive money with which they have to find accommodation for themselves somewhere – in existing communities. But then, for example, rents rise. And that can lead to a zero-sum game where some lose and others win. People then see nepotism and unequal treatment, and the issue becomes politically charged.

In other countries, conflicts tend to arise in the education sector.

Fanning: It's true, there are schools, for example, where many children don't speak English, German or any other language – and the local population may see this as a burden on the education of their own children.

And what is the situation in Ireland in this regard?

Fanning: In Ireland, the education system has actually done a pretty good job so far when it comes to integrating different migrant groups—and that includes educational outcomes. Even when you break it down by skin colour—say, black versus white—you don't see major differences.

Just yesterday, there was a new report released by the ESRI—the Economic and Social Research Institute, which conducts most of the research on integration and social policy in Ireland. And for the first time, this report looked at attitudes in lower-income communities towards the arrival of migrants. The key question was: are poorer communities more critical or resistant when it comes to migration?

The idea that working-class or low-income communities feel left behind or overwhelmed has definitely come to the surface since COVID—especially around the refugee issue. At the extreme end of things, there have been assaults, arson attacks—you could even call them riots. There were a few outbreaks of unrest that, of course, looked dramatic on television—like the Dublin riot in November 2023, which made headlines around the world. Buses were set on fire right in the middle of the city.

A backlash - against Immigration?

Fanning: Only partly. It was a protest that had many different causes – especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods – and then erupted in such a chaotic form. Whether it comes from the right or the left, it definitely shows that there are problems with social cohesion.

Is there an integration policy in Ireland and if so, how successful has it been?

Fanning: Ireland basically had a small sub-department that looked after integration policy. And if you searched for 'integration policy' in Ireland, you'd probably find a few policy documents. But to be honest, I don't think there's a really strong or clearly defined project behind it—there's not much of an intellectual framework guiding it. I'd say it's more of an implicit approach than an explicit one. Again, that's kind of the Irish way. You don't really get the kind of open, public debates about identity that you might see in the UK or France—questions like, 'What does it mean to be British?' or 'What does it mean to be French?' That just hasn't really happened here. No.

But I have to say, to me, integration is a synonym of what we would call social inclusion in the European Union policy sense. So, inclusion and cooperation, dealing with the antithesis of this is social exclusion.

What could that be? And please, could you give me an example?

Fanning: There are policies aimed at including excluded communities—trying to tackle inequality over time, improving access to employment, education, and so on. But there are still plenty of gaps in the research on this topic.

For example, I would've encouraged them to take on a focused project looking at where Muslims live in Ireland. We actually have a significant Muslim population here. Are Muslims particularly marginalized? In other European countries, that's often been the case—it's become a highly politicized issue, and in very complex ways. But in Ireland, the answer so far seems to be: not really, no. Could that change over time? I don't know. It's something we'll need to keep an eye on.

It's a traditional or a relatively new immigration?

Fanning: These groups arrived between 1999 and 2004, mostly as asylum seekers. Many were sub-Saharan Africans, often from Nigeria. They were highly marginalized—kept in the system for years, not allowed to work—and they faced racism. Racism is a real issue in Ireland, just like in many other countries, and with that comes a certain level of discrimination.

Black African people in particular seem to be falling behind when it comes to things like access to employment. In sociological terms, they'd be described as a "racialized group." Now, has anything been done specifically to address the needs of Black people in Ireland through integration policy? The answer is no. It hasn't.

But the big question now is about the next generation—because my classrooms are full of the children of migrants who arrived here in the early 2000s. They've grown up here. They are Irish. You know, if you are a citizen, or have access to EU citizenship, or have been naturalized, or you've got your residency, you're fairly secure. And if you're able to speak English and you've got a good education, you're going to be all right.

So, this group of immigrants is now also well educated?

Fanning: They certainly are. Since 2000, their level of education has actually been higher than that of the Irish population as a whole.

And that is perhaps why there are no particular efforts to exclude migrants from social benefits, as is the case, for example, in mainstream political discourse, even in the United Kingdom.

Joe Giles (Policy Researcher of European Diplomats): You talked about it before. I'd like for you to expand upon it if you will. So, what role in your eyes does the media play in terms of the debate on immigration in your country?

Fanning: Okay, I would say that there is a real disjuncture at this stage between what the mainstream media does and how it performs, by which I mean Ireland is still fortunate.

It's a small country with five million, but it has the same three broadsheet newspapers, the Irish Times, Irish Independent, and the Examiner every day. As well as that, it has a large number of newspapers that are kind of often Irish editions of British newspapers. They run from quality newspapers like The Guardian to tabloids and so on and so forth. And then we have, of course, radio, many radio stations, radio is very popular in Ireland, and national television, three state channels, at least.

I would say that in the mainstream Irish media, the debate is very carefully managed, that there's a very, very, very little identifiable xenophobia, people who get to write columns in these newspapers are much more likely to be progressive, much more likely to be liberal.

But there's a whole generation of people out there, including younger people, who don't consume this media, who take their news from online, who therefore basically see this national media, this establishment media, this legacy media, as out of touch totally with what is going on and very politically correct.

And then the social media…

Fanning: On social media you have at least one very successful conservative/right online newspaper website called GRIPT. And they will give quite a lot of space to people who are very skeptical about immigration. Some of them are progressive and some of them basically are anti-establishment and then there's quite a lot of stuff where people just take their information from online. And I think most people take their news these days from their phone, for example X.

Bornschein: Under these circumstances, does this not lead to a certain percentage of society developing mistrust towards more or less liberal newspapers that do not reflect their perceptions, with consequences for democracy as such?

Fanning: Absolutely. Migration isn’t my only research topic. I’m particularly interested in people who are conservatives, who feel left out and left behind. I think, in the Irish case, there’s an establishment progressivism that’s seriously out of touch with how many—or most—people think about the country.

And I think that, in what you might call culture—the culture wars—single-issue anti-immigrant candidates won't get elected, but maybe candidates who can articulate a lot of grievances and dissatisfaction with what I'd describe as concern about the pace of change—dislocation, alienation—those things are real.

When I look at the Irish Times in the morning, a newspaper with a proud history that I write for, I get very frustrated reading it because it feels like it's written by a civil servant. If I go online, I get a much more unfiltered version of the story. In other words, there you may have a stronger political orientation, but it's a different orientation that doesn't shield its readers from uncomfortable facts or truths. Even people who are relatively liberal are dissatisfied with a lot of this establishment media.

And TV...

Fanning: I used to watch television, but now mostly I watch Netflix and use other such apps. I don't watch the television news because I think has become too repetitive and dumbed down. I think the legacy media has a problem on its hands. On one level they play it very safe, and the rest of it is the Wild West. At the other end, it's associated with establishment values that don't seem to reflect what a lot of people think is happening in their communities.

I'll give you an example from two or three days ago, and this is just from following a story on Twitter/X. The Palestinian conflict is big news in Ireland, and a lot of people in Ireland—unlike in Germany—are very drawn to supporting Palestine–Gaza. Ireland has a small, beleaguered Jewish community. But a Jewish person was berated with extreme anti-Semitism on a bus. Okay, the person who does it is arrested.

Somebody recorded a video of the incident. Literally everybody in the country has watched it by bedtime. But the story is not in the Irish Times the following day, it's not in the Irish Independent, it's not in the Examiner. But people are talking about it on social media. And additionally, the official language in politics is more controlled than ever. That leads to more distance.

However, many also see the advantages of language being more purified than before.

Fanning: If everyone agrees not to go down into the sewer, this naturally leads to more civilised politics. But at the same time, official discourse can appear out of touch. When people have legitimate concerns or issues, politicians are not willing to speak about or civil servants won't respond to actual concerns that certain communities have, and therefore it feels that the state is against them. These issues aren't unique to Ireland.

In any case, I would say that we have good, strong media by international standards, although television is becoming increasingly weaker. Radio is doing very well, it continues to enjoy a high reputation in Ireland, and there are many good discussions on the radio. At the same time, there is a kind of counter-movement taking place on social media. These people now only get their news from there and no longer have any connection to print media.

The right wing would argue that there is a kind of conspiracy between journalists, academics, politicians and civil servants to govern the country in a certain way that excludes the concerns of ordinary people.

And what do you think?

Fanning: In my opinion, we should always listen and try desperately to understand what is going on out there, especially among people who are dissatisfied with rapid social change, whether in cultural terms or in relation to immigration.

Could you give me an example?

Fanning: Sure... You know, Ireland has a constitution and a basic law, if you will, written in the 1930s with the language of the 1930s, and it had a clause on there on the family at one stage. You know, the family is the basic unit of society. A woman provides care of the home and that should be valued.

Changing the wording of the role of women in the constitution went to a referendum last year. And it was given then to the civil service to write the concrete formulation. They wanted to make it inclusive so it got very much caught up in the new stuff around gender, identities, with inclusive language, so they took the word woman out altogether. They talked about people who are “carers”.

Can you imagine, 73% of the Irish electorate preferred the 1937 wording to this proposed 2024 wording, although all the political parties and the main trade unions, and all the NGOs recommended to change the constitution to their supporters. And yet, 73% of people said, no, you're out of touch with us.

And how did the government react to this?

Fanning: Here's the thing: the following week, a big change took place in Irish politics besides the Prime Minister stepping down and a new one being elevated. Other than that minor change, all the focus was on immigration, because the politicians felt this was a protest vote. But it wasn't just a protest vote about this; it was a protest vote about a lot of things.

They started saying, we'll do more, we'll be tougher, we'll reduce the number of refugees, and that became the response. We'll end the temporary protection directive for the Ukrainians. All of this came in the following week as a response to something that was about culture.

How do you view this reaction by the government, which is in a sense an adaptation to popular will?

Fanning: I believe that politicians feared that everyone would turn against them and that the zeitgeist would then change. The referendum could have been on anything, potentially, and it would have been turned down because maybe people just use referenda as a place to express their discontent, in a way that's safer for them to do so than a general election where they might drift closer to the main political parties again. It's quite complicated, that's why politics is so fascinating.

The interpretation that came from the government was, we're going to come back to you now. We're going to tell you what we're going to do; it was more about immigration. Irish politicians are pretty good at their jobs. They're mostly decent people. Compared to many countries, they're fairly grounded. They often come from families who have been in political parties for generations. They have local organisations behind them, often, they're very plugged in. And they go house to house and talk to people. They still do things like that.

My interpretation would be: there was what I'd call a progressive overreach in particular. And this was the same thing we see in many different countries. I think a lot of that had to do with gender and the politicization of transgender issues, among other things.

It is difficult to imagine that a less pragmatic country would have reacted in this way.

Fanning: Right, this won´t happen if you have a very progressive tone in your government, because coalition governments are often shaped by the small party that's needed, and the Green Party in Ireland is very, very, very progressive. Politicians here there are worried about making those kinds of mistakes, you have to connect with voters at the end of the day.

So, we can see, basically, if you will, grievances bleed off, responses that ameliorate the pressures on a system, the centre holding, if you will. And Irish politics are very centrist in the sense that because of our political system, everybody's chasing the centre. But then there are political parties on the far left who are often very influential. Students especially, and some of them, you know, get involved kind of in mainstream government. On the far right, not so yet, but basically the centre sometimes borrows ideas from the right, but they're presented as centre ideas, as well as left wing ideas. That´s what they have been doing mostly since we began to recover from the economic crash.

From your Irish perspective, do you have recommendations for other European countries or the EU on how to handle immigration?

Fanning: First of all, I think that all countries affected by large-scale migration experience trauma and loss. Most people who migrate are trying to build better lives for themselves and their families, and unless they face high levels of racism and discrimination, many migrations are successful. Countries may face political problems due to large-scale immigration, but most of these issues can be resolved over time. After all, we're all descended from migrants. It's important to stay optimistic, because if the only stories we tell about migration are negative, we start to sound indistinguishable from the xenophobes.

And the European Union?

Fanning: I think the problem with the European Union is that it does contradictory things. It tries to be a big tent that includes countries like Ireland, Germany, and Hungary. It might not be possible to reach a genuine consensus.

And when it comes to the refugee issue, if you look at it purely from an ethical perspective, the European Union criticism of the Americans rings hollow, because 30,000 people did not drown in the Rio Bravo, they drowned in the Mediterranean. Something is being done in our name that is quite appalling. Yet if that barrier weren't there, it feels like more countries would turn further to the right, more quickly.

That means the big challenge is the refugee crisis?

Fanning: Not necessarily. But we respond differently to different kind of migration. When it´s about refugees then it gets politicized. But bringing workers, this never gets politicized, because those people are working the following day, they're just getting by in their lives.

In the Global North, Europe, we all signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Refugees, which means that the moment a refugee arrives, we treat them in welfare terms as if they're a citizen. We don't do the same for someone living in Brazil unless they're going to Portugal or already have European citizenship. In this sense, asylum seekers, refugees in particular, create a zero-sum game. In an ideal world, people who need international protection would claim it and receive it.

When very large numbers arrive who are clearly not entitled to refugee protection because they don't meet the criteria, but they're using the system due to the absence of another migration framework, it becomes highly politicized. Poorly managed this push politics further to the right. The UK is an example: immigration issues topple governments after government. That issue, given all the other complexities Britain faces, becomes the focal point and lightning rod for everything.

This raises the question of the Convention.

Fanning: There are real problems with dealing with refugees. For this reason, there's a bigger philosophical conversation about whether we should withdraw from the UN Convention on the Rights of Refugees because it was designed for a different era. Should we withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights as a default now? You'll see more debate about this issue in the years to come.

But there's another side to it, Europe has a demographic problem.

Fanning: Indeed, our aging population means there's a need to sustain our population. We need people to provide care and services. Consider Italy, which fascinates me: at one level, it has a right-wing prime minister, yet it also has a welfare system that gives money to families who then hire illegal migrants to care for their own people. And there's another layer: is it ethical to take migrants like doctors and nurses from their own countries, leaving those countries bereft of these professionals?

...The necessary perspective of the Global South...

Fanning: It's an incredibly complicated bundle of issues. But this is where I'll end: nation states must be able to control migration and manage their borders, but once someone is here, they should be treated as if they're a citizen, because they're now part of a common community.

If you cut a community out of social policy, it damages social cohesion. So, once we have people with us, we need to fold them in, integrate them, and socially include them. That's my doctrine. But at the same time, countries like Ireland right now would benefit from slowing the rate of immigration we're getting. We have a big housing crisis.

That means, avoid zero-sum thinking and consider the people who feel left behind…

Fanning: The numbers coming into Ireland are higher than they've ever been. To put it in perspective, it's really complicated now. We're building about 35,000 housing units a year in Ireland, but we're taking in over 100,000 migrants a year. So, I'd like to see a slowdown in the rate of change for a while, at the Irish level. After advocating for migrants' rights in so many ways, I'd welcome a political debate on population planning.

Right now, every industry in Ireland benefits from bringing in migrants, but they pass the social costs on to others. Yet we're not getting the necessary debate. What will likely happen in Ireland is an economic crisis with huge consequences for the migration debate too. It will reduce the numbers coming in and increase the numbers going out, because Irish people tend to move to places like Australia for better jobs.

Bryan Fanning, thank you for these insights from Ireland.

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