

From Fantasy of Unity to Diverse Reality: What does the Finnish Immigration Debate Mean?¹

By

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Introduction

Last Christmas (2010), Finnish newspapers decried the removal of references to Christianity in Christmas celebrations in some schools. In the name of not offending anyone, schools decided to remove traditional Christian Christmas songs from their Christmas events. Government ministers have been upset by this, and have emphasized that singing Christmas hymns in schools is not a form of propagating Christianity to non-Christian students, but part of the Finnish tradition.

This incident, relatively trivial in itself, is indicative of the larger debate on multiculturalism and immigration being waged in Finland today. Historically, Finland has taken very few immigrants, and has been a fairly homogeneous country, with numerically small but well-integrated minorities. In recent years, the picture has changed significantly. Finland still admits relatively few immigrants and refugees, but the numbers have risen, and the scene in cities like Helsinki and Tampere is no longer so uniformly white and Christian. This raises a number of challenges for both Finnish identity, and the relationship of that identity with the state, and for the Finnish welfare state.

The rise in the number of immigrants and refugees has led to the inevitable backlash, the formation of anti-immigrant parties. This is typical over much of Western Europe. From the British National Party to the Sweden Democrats, recently elected to Parliament in Finland's Western neighbour, far-right parties have been gaining popularity. In Finland, the populist True Finns party is more moderate than many of its European

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counterparts, but it has been able to raise the issue of immigration to the national spotlight.

In innumerable blogs and newspaper articles, the opponents of immigration publish warnings that what has happened in Western Europe, will happen in Finland as well, if immigration goes unchecked. The favourite examples are the unrest in the immigrant-dominated suburbs of Paris, and closer to home, the problems in Swedish suburbs with large Middle-Eastern and North African populations. As elsewhere in Europe, Muslims are particularly singled out. Perhaps the most-demonized group in all of Finland are the Somalis, many of whom have come to Finland fleeing conflict at home. Somalis are routinely linked to crime and violence. Whenever there is crime, especially violent crime, committed by foreigners, the most avid anti-immigration² advocates call for all foreigners who commit a crime to be expelled. It remains to be seen what effect the botched terrorist attack in Stockholm will have in Sweden and Finland.

It is a distinct possibility that the next Parliamentary elections this spring will be fought largely over immigration. The True Finn Party, the spearhead of the anti-immigration movement, has been gaining on the traditional parties in polls, and they might well be a power-broker in the formation of the next government. Their rise has led to more traditional and moderate parties to toughen their stances on immigration.

All the major parties denounce racism, but there is a growing discourse against *anti*-racism. It is very typical in online discussion forums and blogs to claim that the attempt to avoid racism can justify anything, or even that it is the native, white and Christian population which is facing discrimination. The discussion is deadlocked – those favouring liberal immigration policies accuse the other side of racism, and the opponents of immigration say that they are not racist, just realistic, and that an increase in the number of immigrants will have seriously detrimental effects on the country.

The aim of this paper is to sketch some of the central challenges for Finland, as it faces both rising numbers of immigrants and a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. I will examine the anti-immigrant discourse that is gaining popularity in Finland through highlighting what I consider to be some of its central strands as well as the responses to this discourse. I would like to emphasize from the outset that this essay is meant as a tentative sketch; no comprehensive examination of these discourses has been possible within the limits of this research project. My aim is rather to raise some points which seem to be repeated in the discourses over and over again. The purpose of this study is not to make definitive claims on Finnish immigration policy or the immigration discourse. Rather, my aim is to raise questions and, on a more abstract level, to sketch our some tentative answers.

It should also be emphasized that this essay is unabashedly subjective. One reason for this is that my central starting point is necessarily so. The claim I make is that if we are to understand the controversy over immigration in Finland today, we have to look beyond the issues themselves – we have to look beyond, for instance, the economic effects of immigration. Of course, economic arguments are central on both sides of the debate. Those who favour liberal immigration policies point to the fact that Finland's population is ageing and the country will have to attract immigrants to fill a workforce that will be seriously depleted in the near future. The opponents of immigration point to the costs of taking immigrants, particularly of taking asylum-seekers with little education and no knowledge of Finnish, whose ability to find work is limited and whose integration is seen as costly. Now I do not deny the importance of these issues. Of course, it is important to consider them.

But what this essay is based on is a personal reaction to the flaring-up of the immigration debate. The reason for me to think about these issues is that I have been puzzled by the intensity of the debate. Why is immigration such a big issue, why does it inflame such passion and even hatred on both sides? I simply refuse to believe that this is because immigration is such an important issue, given that Finland still takes relatively few immigrants, and virtually no other political issue is debated so hotly in Finland. This is why I say this essay is unabashedly subjective – its premise is a *feeling* that there is more to this controversy than meets the eye. Discussants on both sides of the debate are free to deny my claim outright; if this piece makes someone even consider the possibility that there are deeper issues involved in the immigration discourse, then it has served its purpose. And perhaps if reading this piece makes someone feel annoyed or angry, then perhaps this can be seen as evidence for my point that the feelings that this issue raises are an important clue. Of course, I claim no objective status whatsoever for this point.

The first two sections paint a tentative picture of the immigration debate, highlighting themes which I consider particularly telling. In the final section I will move the discussion to a more abstract, philosophical level. I believe the controversy over immigration is indicative of a deeper phenomenon in Finland, the shift from a consensus-based polity to one where cultural issues are hotly contested. It seems that it is the cultural aspect of immigration which inflames such passions across the spectrum. But it is not only immigration which does this; there are also other hotly contested cultural issues in Finland today. Perhaps the best example of this is gay marriage, and the stance of the state church towards homosexuals. I will argue that behind much anti-immigrant discourse there is longing for 'the good old days' of a unified culture, where such moral questions need not be contested.

Now it is certainly not clear whether such a unified culture ever existed in Finland, but it is not possible to get into this larger question here. What I think is indisputable is that issues of minority rights, whether they be those of Muslim immigrants or of native Finnish homosexuals, have come to the fore of political discussion. And what we have now in Finland is what in liberal political theory are called different conceptions of the good – perhaps irreconcilably different. It seems that one of the leading anti-immigrant writers, Jussi Halla-Aho believes that if we didn't take immigrants from different cultures, we could avoid these cultural and moral clashes. He writes in his blog:

“But multiculturalism also has a chronic problem which is unrelated to crime and the challenges of finding work [for immigrants – JR], which makes the lives of everyone in a multicultural society unpleasant and difficult: namely that people do not understand each other, and that people are reduced from individuals to representatives of their respective groups”.³

This is perhaps an understandable concern, but underlying it there is the notion that without immigrants, we could avoid the cultural impasses of multiculturalism. To be sure, there might be fewer of them, but it seems that the tide in Finland has turned decisively towards value pluralism and that this would have happened even without immigration. So I think the deeper question is how to deal with irreconcilable differences in conceptions of the good. In the third section I discuss the idea of public reason, and how perhaps it could be used in Finnish political discourse to overcome some impasses. Finally, I consider the effects of multiculturalism on the Finnish welfare state, and draw on ideas in John Rawls's political thought to suggest the possibility that the civic trust and identification with the less well-off required by an extensive welfare state might perhaps be based on a public sense of justice, rather than on a unitary culture.

Discourses of Multiculturalism, Racism and Immigration

There is a curious deadlock in the immigration debate in Finland today. This deadlock is caused largely by talk of racism. To put it very crudely, the proponents of liberal immigration policies paint their opponents as racists, whereas the opponents of immigration argue that the term 'racism' itself has become largely devoid of meaning, or even that those favouring liberal immigration policies want to erode traditional Finnish culture, which is interpreted as racist towards white Christian Finns.

In her Master's thesis on internet discussion on African immigrants to Finland, Heli Ukkonen points out that some Finns feel caved in by the concept of racism – they are afraid of raising any complaints towards foreigners because they are afraid of being branded racists.⁴ She writes that in online discussion forums, the debate can be freer, because one does not have to fear the label of racist. However, even a cursory examination of such

discussion forums reveals that the label is widely used. There is very little space for reasoned discussion because of this over-sensitivity on both sides of the debate.

The deadlock means that there is increased polarization in the debate. As the Somali or Arab asylum seekers are singled out as problematic groups, so do the participants in the public debate on immigration demonize each other. To a large extent, the debate has become a debate about itself; the tone of the conversation has become a favourite topic for participants in the debate. There is very little room for any reasonable discussion of the issues, or of some sort of moderate compromise. So far, the major political parties have been reasonably moderate and pragmatic on the issue of migration. But the shift of power from them to new right-wing parties, the True Finns in particular, will force them to either succumb to the anti-immigrant agenda or to oppose it more clearly. The parliamentary elections this spring might prove decisive in setting the tone of the debate for the near future.

For the traditional political parties, both embracing immigration and opposing it are hazardous courses of action. We have already seen some examples of this, with the Social Democrats adopting 'maassa maan tavalla' as a new slogan. It means that you have to do things the way they are usually done in a particular country; in other words, newcomers to Finland have to adapt. To a certain degree, this is obviously true. It is almost a banality to state that everyone, be they citizens or recently arrived immigrants, has to abide by the laws of the land. This is what the Social Democratic Party claims to be demanding. Their recent policy paper on immigration states:

“Everyone has to abide by Finnish laws in Finland [...] Human rights violations such as ritual mutilations or honour violence, committed under the pretext of different cultural customs, are to be condemned like any other human rights violations”.⁵

This is, of course, true. But why does the point even need to be made in a policy paper on the party's stance on immigration? The mere making of the point raises the spectre that there are significant numbers of immigrants who demand the right to commit human rights violations under the pretext of cultural customs; or that there is a serious possibility that such violations will be permitted under Finnish law, as if there was a powerful immigrant lobby which demanded the legalization of female genital mutilation or honour-killings in the name of communal rights based on culture. It is a straw man, and it is a very typical straw man; this argument is repeated over and over again in the discourse.

What is completely absent as well is the voices of the immigrants themselves. Even though immigration policy makes the news on nearly a daily basis, immigrants themselves do not, except when one of them commits a crime – though this is gradually changing. Hardly anyone asks immigrants or asylum seekers what they think about immigration policy, or what they expect from living in Finland, or why they came. Asylum seekers

are holed up in detention centres waiting, in some cases for years, for a decision on their application. Even though the public debate is raging daily in the media and on the internet, the people themselves who arouse such passion in the discussants, are virtually invisible. It seems that no one even thinks about asking them, or of trying to find out who they actually are and what their real stories are. Perhaps – and this is pure speculation – this is also evidence of my larger point that the problem is not the issues themselves, or the actual people who arrive in Finland from abroad, but rather the more abstract problem of the challenge to the notion of a unitary culture that these issues and individuals pose.

What is puzzling as well is the fact that even though a major point in anti-immigrant rhetoric is the fear that traditional Finnish culture and traditional ways of doing things in Finland will be eroded, you hardly ever hear of immigrants making vocal demands that things should be changed in Finland. Finland does not have any significant migrants' organizations exerting any kind of political influence. There is not a single member of Parliament with an immigrant background. If there were significant lobby groups representing different ethnic groups or religions, such as there are in the United States, it would be more understandable that many people consider immigrants such a threat. But such groups simply do not exist in Finland, at least not in such a form that would enable them to wield any influence.

This, I think, is further evidence that the debate is not really about the issues in themselves. The issues are on the surface of the debate, but to understand it, I think we have to look past them. What makes those issues so important? Why do they arouse such strong feelings? Those opposing liberal immigration policies would say that they are so important in themselves – for instance, that asylum seekers cost so much money that they put too great a burden on the Finnish economy, or that they pose a real security threat. But the issues cannot be trusted in such a case.

This issue highlights a wider problem in liberal democracies, and in liberal political theory. Liberal political theory, very crudely put, emphasizes the rights of the individual against the state. But in the case of multiculturalism, you very easily run into trouble. If you have a fairly homogeneous country such as Finland, you do not generally have to deal with thorny issues about, for instance, the teaching of different mother tongues in schools, or teaching different religions, or, as in the example I started with, of public celebrations incorporating religious elements in public spaces such as schools. According to conventional liberal theory, the state is supposed to be neutral in relation to cultural issues. In Finland, this is complicated further by the fact that though it is a relatively secular society, there is an official state church. Christian traditions are deeply ingrained in schools and other walks of public life, though for most people religious displays are a formality rather than signs of serious worship.

Liberal political theory has, in recent years, emphasized the concept of public reason. Public reason means a particular way of conducting debate in public forums on political issues. The idea is that instead of referring to personal or communal interests in making public claims, discussants should instead appeal to reasons which are public, in the sense that they do not stem from any particular world view or conception of the good. In other words, the reasons utilized in public debate have to be "open" to all participants in the sense that particular parts of the population cannot be excluded from being able to accept them because they are, for instance, based on religious grounds that they do not share.

I think there is ground for some serious research here on ways of talking in public forums on controversial issues such as immigration and multiculturalism, and I will offer some more thoughts on this in the final section. In Finland, it will become increasingly difficult to appeal to Finnish or Christian tradition in cases of cultural conflict such as the rather minor example of Christmas hymns in schools illustrates. In their place, what will be needed are more public reasons, which are acceptable both to those who share the Finnish tradition and those who are new to it. I do not think it is acceptable to just state that these are our traditions, and everyone has to accept they have a privileged position in public life, because increasingly the "us" whose traditions they are is fragmented, not only because of immigration but because of cultural shifts within the native Finnish population, for instance the decline of the Lutheran church. The idea of public reason put forward in much recent research in liberal political philosophy perhaps offers one avenue to pursue in order to make it possible to move forward in these debates. If some sort of neutral, common ground between the proponents of liberal immigration policies, the opponents of immigration and the immigrants themselves, cannot be found, then a deepening of the polarization happening today seems inevitable.

Why Such a Big Debate?

I would argue that in Finland no other political issue than immigration flares up such passion and generates such controversy. There have been convictions of bloggers for inciting religious hatred by publishing vehemently anti-Muslim posts, and recently a man was convicted of threatening the immigration minister Astrid Thors on Facebook. Immigration scholars have been threatened. No other issue makes people so angry as immigration – on both sides of the debate.

Against this background, the insistence of the opponents of immigration that this is not about racism is perhaps interesting. Blogger-turned politician Jussi Halla-Aho, perhaps the most vocal critic of liberal immigration policies in Finland, argues that he does not oppose foreigners, but rather opposes the vast sums of money spent on admitting asylum

seekers to Finland. This is an argument representative of the anti-immigrant stance.

Yet Finland's asylum numbers are small. In 2009, just under 6 000 people sought asylum in Finland. In the same year, the Immigration Ministry granted asylum in only 116 cases, with a bit under 1 300 additional asylum seekers granted permission to stay in the country. The numbers of immigrants coming to the country for other reasons than seeking asylum are much higher, but the asylum numbers are of particular importance because it is this humanitarian immigrations that is most vehemently opposed.

It is quite curious that such small numbers of people excite such passion in blogs, online discussion forums and in the media. I think this debate echoes the much smaller debate waged on development aid. Finland's development aid is less than 0,7 per cent of GDP, but still some commentators are loudly calling for scrapping it altogether, as if this could solve the country's budget woes. One aspect of the the discourse is the notion that Finland cannot take care of all the world's problems, as if taking in a few hundred or thousand refugees or spending a few hundred million Euros a year on development aid was supposed to do this. There seems to be something of a nationalist backlash going on, a demand that Finland focus narrowly on protecting Finnish interests and refrain from helping out those in need in other parts of the world.

Interestingly, there hasn't been a significant change in immigration policy so far, and the government has actually recently increased development aid, so the effectiveness of this discourse is yet to be seen. But it will surely gain more influence if the True Finns party makes significant gains in the next elections, as is very likely. They have been making huge strides in opinion polls, with their support increasing in virtually every new poll taken. They have all but reached the support levels of the three big traditional parties, and they are a serious threat to those parties in the upcoming elections.

Another interesting point which perhaps points towards something deeper going on here is the limited correlation between negative attitudes towards immigration and income levels. One of the major arguments against humanitarian immigration in particular, in other words, against taking asylum seekers, is the financial argument already noted above. Asylum seekers cost a lot of money, the argument goes, and they drain Finnish welfare resources.

The argument that asylum seekers in particular come to Finland to enjoy the lavish welfare benefits that the country offers is repeated over and over again in anti-immigration blogs and informal discussions. Asylum seekers are the group that is singled out as problematic. The possibility that asylum seekers could become productive workers in Finland, or even the possibility that they are in serious need of protection, does not seem to

occur. In any case, the limited correlation between income levels and attitudes towards immigration is interesting. According to a poll commissioned by Homma Forum, which is an online hub for the anti-immigration movement in Finland, the proportion of people earning 10 000 Euros a year who think current immigration policy is too lax is practically the same as the proportion of people who share this opinion who earn over 70 000 Euros a year (50 and 51 per cent, respectively).⁶ At least at first glance, it would seem that those earning a low income would be the ones most threatened by immigration, given that especially asylum-seekers are accused of taking the social welfare benefits that people with a low income are more likely to be beneficiaries of, and typically, if they gain employment at all, are employed in low-paying jobs. Furthermore, people with lower incomes are presumably more likely to live in suburbs where rents are lower, exactly the kind of areas that the opponents of liberal immigration policies fear will face the same kind of unrest as has been seen in France and Sweden.

The supporters of liberal immigration policies tend to refer to Finland's need for more workers. The workforce will be significantly diminished in coming years as the baby-boom generation retires, and there is serious concern whether the Finnish economy will be able to support a welfare state, whose expenditures will rise with the increased need to care for the elderly. At the same time, levels of unemployment in Finland are high, and long-term unemployment is a serious problem. Many opponents of liberal immigration policies ask why the country should take newcomers when so many Finnish people are out of work. During the recent economic crisis, unemployment has increased and attitudes towards immigration have hardened. Likewise, in the 1990s, attitudes turned more against immigration when Finland faced the worst recession in its history. Somali asylum seekers arrived at the worst possible point in time from this perspective.

In any case, given these arguments, it is quite curious that it is not those who are poorest and most vulnerable in Finnish society, for instance the unemployed, who hold the hardest attitudes towards immigration. As I noted, there is limited correlation between attitudes towards immigration and income levels, and that it is actually the unemployed and students who have relatively more liberal attitudes. In other words, those people who might in reality have some reason to fear for their jobs when facing competition from less-well educated immigrants – particularly asylum seekers with little schooling – are not particularly critical of immigration.

This, I think, points to the conclusion that something deeper is going on. I think one possible explanation, which I have already referred to, is that until very recently, it has been possible in Finland to think of the country as something of a haven from the confusion and diversity of the world. Finland has been politically very stable and run on consensus, and ethnically and culturally homogeneous enough so that a stable Finnish

identity has been able to live on at least in people's imaginations. Of course, part of this homogeneity has always been imagined, and that imagination has been based on conveniently forgetting, for instance, about the indigenous Sami minority. But the fantasy of a unified nation state with a unified national culture supported by a unified state church has been, and probably still is, easier to uphold in Finland than in many other countries.

I think the debate on immigration is part of a larger cultural shift in Finland, an opening up to diversity that provokes a lot of resistance and longing for the 'good old days'. The only other political issue in recent years that has provoked anywhere near the amount of passion that immigration has, is gay marriage. The Lutheran state church has run into particular trouble, trying to hold on to its dogmatic tradition and conservative members, whilst trying not to offend more liberal members of the church. The result has been a mishmash of policies and statements, which are not satisfactory to anyone. The issue was aroused a fury of public debate in 2010 when the state broadcasting company Yle organized a debate on gay rights issues on one of its current affairs programmes. Particular attention was drawn by the comments of Päivi Räsänen, member of parliament and the leader of the Christian Democratic party. The airing of her very conservative stance of these issues, and the reluctance of the Lutheran church to clearly distance itself from her views, resulted in tens of thousands of people resigning their membership in the church.⁷ Again, very subjectively, I think what is particularly notable about this is the amount of *emotion* that this debate aroused, both for the supporters of same-sex marriage rights and the opponents of such rights. And I think it aroused such emotion for much the same reason as the debate on immigration and multiculturalism has aroused emotion.

What I think is starting to happen is that Finland's traditional political culture, based on consensus and wide political coalitions across the spectrum, is facing increasingly polarized calls to political action from more clearly-defined liberals and conservatives. It is these cultural issues of multiculturalism and, for example, the definition of marriage, that generate the most heated debate. It is impossible to say what the next big emotional debate will be about, but it would not be surprising if it would be about an issue concerning personal identity or personal morality, where irreconcilably different conceptions of the good clash. The diversity of the world is finally reaching Finland, and many perhaps long for a simpler reality.

Towards Common Ground: The Idea of Public Reason

So far in this paper, I have tried to sketch out two arguments: that fundamentally, the controversy about immigration is a controversy over culture and that such cultural controversies are inevitable, whether Finland takes immigrants or not. Now these are issues which have been central in

Anglo-American liberal political theory for a long time. Even though multiculturalism is a relatively new issue in political theory, the issue of value pluralism is not; it is at the heart of virtually all liberal theorizing on politics in recent decades. One of the basic questions of political philosophy has become: how can individuals who hold irreconcilably different world views and conceptions of the good, whether religious or secular, can live together, and not only live together, but also affirm a conception of justice which corresponds to everyone's sense of justice?

It is, of course, highly questionable whether liberal theory has been able to solve this fundamental problem. But perhaps the liberal idea of public reason, which is one part of the liberal response to the fundamental question of contemporary politics, points to one avenue we could pursue in sorting out the impasse in the Finnish immigration discourse. It is no longer possible, if it ever was, to point to some unitary conception of the good through which we can resolve political dilemmas. A nagging problem with the immigration discourse is also the insistence on the integration or assimilation of immigrants.⁸ Immigrants are expected to adopt to the Finnish way of life, but what is the Finnish way of life? Does that include being a member of the Lutheran church, as the vast majority of the population is? But tens of thousands of people left the church after they were disappointed with its conservative stance on gay rights. What about native Finnish people who have converted to Islam? What about minority movements within the Lutheran church, which are certainly Finnish, but which take a more conservative stance on many issues than the mainstream church? What does it mean to embrace Finnish values when some of those values are so hotly contested?

In a sense, then, I think what is needed is some kind of neutral ground. The idea of public reason provides at least a starting point. Very crudely, the idea of public reason is that it is necessary to divorce people's individual conceptions of the good from the public idea of justice that they espouse. Or in other words, that people cannot demand public goods on the basis of their private conceptions of the good; they need to appeal to reasons which people who do not share those conceptions can accept as well.

The idea of public reason can be seen as an extension of the liberal principle of the priority of the right over the good. It is an attempt to seek out ground which we can all share fairly – the liberal idea is that whilst we hold irreconcilably different views of what is *good*, we can agree on what is *right*. The idea of public reason extends this notion to the ways that we conduct debate on fundamental questions of politics. One of the foremost theorists of the idea of public reason, John Rawls, writes:

”As reasonable and rational, and knowing that they affirm a diversity of reasonable religious and philosophical doctrines, they [citizens of a democratic society – JR] should be ready to explain the basis of their actions to one another in terms each could reasonably expect that others

might endorse as consistent with their freedom and equality [...] Understanding how to conduct oneself as a democratic citizen includes understanding an ideal of public reason.”⁹

What it is not reasonable to expect from one another as democratic citizens is that others accept the reasons we give solely on the basis of our conception of the good, or to extend the idea, our culture. It is not reasonable for a Christian to demand that his or her religion be given special status in public life on the basis that Christianity defines his or her comprehensive doctrine and conception of the good. Nor is it reasonable for an avowed atheist to demand that the state curb the exercise of religion even if he feels strongly that religion is mere superstition. It is not reasonable for Finnish people to demand that immigrants act according to the slogan 'maassa maan tavalla', in other words, according to relativistic cultural customs. Of course, they can and must demand that immigrants, just like everyone else, act in accordance with *right*.

One argument that Jussi Halla-Aho has put forward is that liberally-minded proponents of multiculturalism easily surrender established, Western or Finnish values or cultural norms in the face of difference. He has argued that we are able to see the relativity of our own values and how they can be changed for the better – for instance, it has been possible to considerably improve the status of women in Finnish society and in Western societies more generally very significantly over the past several decades. But, Halla-Aho insists, we are unable to see anything negative in the cultural norms of immigrants, particularly Muslims, when they conflict with our own conception of justice. He writes:

“But when a Muslim immigrant arrives at the scene with an oppressed wife, and who cuts the throat of a still-conscious sheep, who decides on his children’s’ spouses and who smokes a pipe in a café, these cultural features are suddenly transformed into objects of protection. They bring colour to our society. At the minimum, people are extremely careful in criticizing them.”¹⁰

In other words, Halla-Aho maintains, we – native, Finnish, Western – hold ourselves to universal values, but are too scared to hold immigrants up to the same standards. As an aside, I think it seems that Halla-Aho thinks we should hold immigrants up to even higher standards than we hold ourselves. There are no exemptions from any Finnish laws for immigrants on cultural grounds – and given the rate of domestic abuse in Finland, for instance, it seems that there are a lot of us who do not hold ourselves to such high standards. And it seems that online forums are full of criticisms of immigrant customs; who is too timid to denounce immigrants who violate human rights norms or break the law? Every time an immigrant commits a crime, there is a flurry of discussion on the internet, with many people calling for all immigrants who commit a crime to be deported.

As I noted in the beginning, there has been a sort of public backlash against this phenomenon – illustrated or conjured up, depending on your

point of view, by Halla-Aho – i.e., this supposed phenomenon where traditional Finnish values are abandoned in the face of the immigrant flood. This is eminently clear from the recently published election manifesto of the True Finn Party. The party emphasizes Finnish culture in its manifesto:

“Certain special characteristics such as language, cultural customs, art, conceptions of law, nature, myths and beliefs, affect the identity of every people. These are unique for every people, which is part of the richness and diversity of the world. No matter how strong the trend of globalization grows, the importance of nationalities and of national identity will never disappear.”¹¹

The manifesto goes on to state that multiculturalism can never take the place of national identity; that multiculturalism actually consists of the interaction between different national identities. In other words, multiculturalism is not a mishmash of cultures, but instead a meeting of distinct national cultures, which remain independent of each other. As an aside, this is a curious view of culture, as if national cultures were unified wholes with clear-cut histories and uncontested norms.

The very fact that a now relatively major political party has to include the protection of a unitary Finnish national culture in its political manifesto points to the fragmentation of that culture. Surely there would be no need to politically bolster the unity of a culture if that unity was not contested. Perhaps there are some parallels with attempts a few years ago in the UK to define 'Britishness', which was also a reaction to the discourse on multiculturalism.

In any case, it seems that it is no longer possible to criticize cultural customs or moral norms simply on the basis of invoking Finnish culture. It is simply not an adequate response to say that an immigrant cannot act in particular way because we happen to act differently. This is, of course, not to say that any appeal to culture should be tolerated, far from it. But there simply does not exist some unitary conception of the good that we can appeal to and say that this is how we do things here; you have to adapt or leave.

Now for most cases, at least the most significant ones, it is simply sufficient to point to universal human rights standards. We certainly do not need to point to some relativistic Finnish cultural norm to state outright that honour-killings are not to be permitted. The point is blatantly obvious; surely the right to life is a fundamental human right, a *right*, not something that happens to be valued in some particular conception of the good. And it seems almost perverse to say that honour killings should not be permitted because “that's not the way we do things around here”; it relativizes the crime of murder and turns it into something that just happens to be unacceptable because it is not part of our culture. Surely such phenomena can be condemned outright. A Finnish man beating his wife to death is not somehow committing less of a human rights violation on the grounds that domestic violence is an unfortunately common phenomenon in Finnish

culture; likewise in such a clear-cut violation of a universal right as a murder committed in the name of 'honour', surely it makes no difference whatsoever that the murderer justifies his crime by saying that he was acting to uphold family honour, and that upholding such honour is important in his culture.

Where the problems lie, I think, are in less-dramatic cases where it is not so easy to refer to a universal right. Examples such as butchering practices, which Halla-Aho mentions, or clothing (whether you can claim exemption from wearing certain types of work clothing on religious grounds, for instance) or public displays of religion such as the example about Christmas hymns in schools, come to mind. It is in these kinds of cases that the idea of public reason could perhaps be utilized in providing a kind of neutral ground for debate, though it is not possible here to consider whether using public reason as a guide could actually help *resolve* such questions.

It is perhaps not even possible to resolve such issues in a way that satisfies the sense of justice of people on both sides of the issue. Finland might well face the same kinds of cultural-moral impasses such as the abortion issue has been and still is in the United States. But even if we cannot reach definitive resolutions on thorny issues, at least the idea of public reason could help define the way that we talk to each other, and foster what Rawls calls the "duty of civility" that democratic citizens have towards one another.

Conclusion: Challenges for the Welfare State

What I have attempted to do in this essay is to sketch some features of the Finnish immigration debate and look beyond the issues on the surface such as the numbers of immigrants or asylum seekers and their economic effects on the country. I wish to emphasize again that this essay is self-consciously subjective; I do not claim that it is a systematic analysis of the current political climate *vis-à-vis* immigration. It is rather a sketch, an attempt to open up new avenues of analysis and thought on thoroughly complex issues.

I began with looking at prominent features of the public debate, and in the third part of the essay I moved to a more abstract level, to political theory. This is because I do not believe the issues can be resolved at the level of practical politics; what is needed is a serious, philosophical look at what Finland stands for. Is it a unitary nation-state with clearly defined borders not only in terms of land but also in terms of culture? Can we still say with precision that this person is Finnish and that one is not, and thus can we really determine whether a particular immigrant has been assimilated or not? Is Christianity an important part of being Finnish at a time when at the very minimum tens of thousands of members of the state church are

losing faith in it? Is there really a culture which immigrants need to embrace to be integrated or should we shift our focus towards norms which we can share regardless of culture?

One of the central challenges posed by immigration and increased multiculturalism in Finland is the effect of these phenomena on the welfare state. In Finland, support for the welfare state and the high taxes it entails has been fairly easy to muster, partly perhaps because of the homogeneity of the population – one can identify with the people that one's taxes go towards helping (more important, perhaps, is the fact that the middle-class benefits widely from the welfare state, from free education to healthcare; the welfare state is not primarily a poverty-alleviation system). There has been some speculation that increased cultural diversity would lower support for extensive welfare states and the high levels of taxation, because people will not identify as much with the people such schemes help.¹² The youth organization of the True Finn Party provides one of the clearest formulations of this fear in its statement of principles:

“We ask: what will happen to people's willingness to pay taxes and to the Nordic welfare state in a society which is solely based on multiculturalism? Until now, the Nordic welfare model has been based on shared values and the idea of building a nation that is [our – JR] very own. These principles have made possible an extensive welfare state and a democratic system of decision-making, where, from the outset, everyone has equal opportunities to contribute and to pursue prosperity [...].”¹³

This is a larger worry in political theory. “MCPs [multicultural policies – JR], critics worry, gradually erode the interpersonal trust, social solidarity, and political coalitions that sustain the welfare state.[note omitted]”¹⁴ Will Kymlicka and Keith Banting write in their introduction to their volume *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State*. Kymlicka and Banting sketch what they call the 'heterogeneity/redistribution trade-off hypothesis', which is the notion that it is “inherently difficult to generate feelings of national solidarity and trust across ethnic/racial lines”.¹⁵ Extensive welfare states require perhaps a more developed sense of such trust and solidarity than more laissez-faire states. High levels of taxation mean that citizens have to have a reasonable degree of trust that their money is spent in worthwhile ways, and a reasonable degree of solidarity towards those less well-off in society whom their taxes partly go towards helping.

As Kymlicka and Banting note, there has been little research on the effects of increased immigration and multicultural policies on the welfare state; and the research that does exist has yielded divergent results. So it is certainly not possible here to pronounce that immigration and increased cultural diversity do not pose a threat to the welfare state. There is scope for some serious research here. It would be important to ascertain to what extent cultural homogeneity and the ability to identify with the recipients of welfare assistance in cultural terms explains support for the welfare state and to what extent is that support based on a civic sense of justice not

dependent on culture. Furthermore, it would be extremely important to identify to what extent such support for the welfare state is based on the fact that the welfare state does not simply benefit the poor, but also the middle-class in terms of free education, parental leaves, public health care and so forth.

There is one possibility, perhaps idealistic, which comes to mind from John Rawls's work. Rawls emphasizes repeatedly in his works that a compact on justice cannot be based on a *modus vivendi* – a contingent, pragmatic agreement based on political necessity rather than authentic moral agreement. But what begins as a *modus vivendi* can perhaps develop into something deeper. Rawls uses the example of religious toleration in Europe beginning in the 16th century – it began as a practical necessity when it became clear that neither the Protestants nor the Catholics would be able to overcome the other completely.¹⁶ But what began as a *modus vivendi*, later developed into what Rawls calls an overlapping consensus, a genuine agreement on an commitment to a political conception of justice. In the case of religious toleration, this meant the development of the *modus vivendi* into the norm of toleration and the right of religious freedom, in other words, from political contingency to *right*.

Now I would like to suggest that perhaps the principles represented by the welfare state, such as guaranteeing at least a minimum standard of living for the least well-off in society, or of levelling the playing field in terms of educational opportunity by ensuring that education is free even at the university level, which certainly were initially embraced pragmatically, as part of a *modus vivendi* to, among other things, combat the threat of communism, might have become so embedded in a civic sense of justice in Finland that they might survive as ideals and principles even without the support of a unitary culture. In other words, it is worth considering and investigating whether it would be possible to develop a sense of belonging and civic community based not so much on shared culture but shared political ideals – a shared sense of justice. And it is also worth asking whether such a shared political ideal *already exists*; in other words, whether the welfare state has already fostered such a sense of social justice that we can identify with the beneficiaries of welfare benefits even if we do not share a common culture with them.

If either of these possibilities is not completely utopian, then perhaps it would be possible to retain what is best about Finland – a commitment to both taking care of the least advantaged in society and of fostering substantive equality of opportunity – even if we increasingly diverge on cultural issues and issues of individual morality. What I am sketching out here is not the nightmare of the critics of immigration and multiculturalism – that anything goes in the name of cultural relativism and respect for difference. What I am suggesting is a political culture which is not based directly on national culture, but on a Rawlsian overlapping

consensus; that citizens should feel obligated *qua* citizens to follow the law, and feel sufficiently obligated by a civic sense of justice that they would support helping those most in need through the welfare state. In other words, what immigrants would need to commit to would not be specific cultural values, but to a shared notion of justice – a notion of justice that would not exclude them from the outset, but one which they could embrace as fair.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Calcutta Research Group for inviting me for the short-term research fellowship in Kolkata which enabled me to work on this essay, and for their hospitality during my stay. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury of CRG for her help organizing my stay in Kolkata, hospitality during it, and support in completing this project.

2 I use the term anti-immigrant repeatedly in this essay to refer broadly to those critical of liberal immigration policies. It is perhaps slightly too dramatic a term, given that the opponents of liberal immigration policies prefer to describe themselves as "maahanmuuttokriittinen", i.e. "critical of immigration". I use "anti-immigration" for brevity.

3 Translated from Finnish: Halla-Aho, Jussi (2006) "Monikulttuurisuuden ongelmia", http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/monikulttuurisuuden_ongelmia.html (accessed 08/03/2011)

4 Ukkonen, Heli (2008) "Rasismi ja toiseuden ongelma – Maahanmuuttaja-aiheisen internet keskustelun antropologista tarkastelua" (Jyväskylä, University of Jyväskylä).

5 Translated from Finnish: SDP (2010) "Reilu ja hallittu maahanmuuttopolitiikka: SDP:n maahanmuuttotyöryhmän raportti", http://www.sdp.fi/sites/www.sdp.fi/files/politiikka/reilu_ja_hallittu_maahanmuuttopolitiikka.pdf

6 Halla-Aho, Jussi (2010) "Homma ry:n tutkimus maahanmuuttoasenteista", http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/homma_ryn_tutkimus_maahanmuuttoasenteista.html (accessed 08/03/2011).

7 To be sure, Räsänen denies that her comments had anything to do with these resignations, but the unprecedented rise in the number of people leaving the church right after the programme had aired and the fact that much of the public discussion was focused on her views, suggests otherwise.

8 I wish to point out that I certainly do not believe there is anything problematic about the notion that everyone has to adapt to the laws of the land in the sense of obeying them. The point I am trying to make is a wider one about culture.

9 Rawls, John (1993) *Political Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Press), p. 218.

10 Translated from Finnish: Halla-Aho, Jussi (2008) "Turkkilainen tupakoi", http://www.halla-aho.com/scripta/turkkilainen_tupakoi.html (accessed 08/03/2011)

11 Translated from Finnish: Perussuomalaiset (2011) "Suomalaiselle sopivin: Perussuomalaiset r.p:n eduskuntavaaliohjelma 2011".

- 12 Banting, Keith & Kymlicka, Will, eds., (2006) *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution in Contemporary Democracies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 2-3.
- 13 Translated from Finnish: Perussuomalaiset nuoret ry (2008) *Periaateohjelma 2008*, <http://www.ps-nuoret.net/liitteet/PeriaateohjelmaPerusS-Nuoret.pdf> (accessed 09/03/2011)
- 14 Banting & Kymlicka, *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State*, p. 2.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 16 Rawls, John (2001) *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press), ed. Kelly, Erin, p. 192.

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