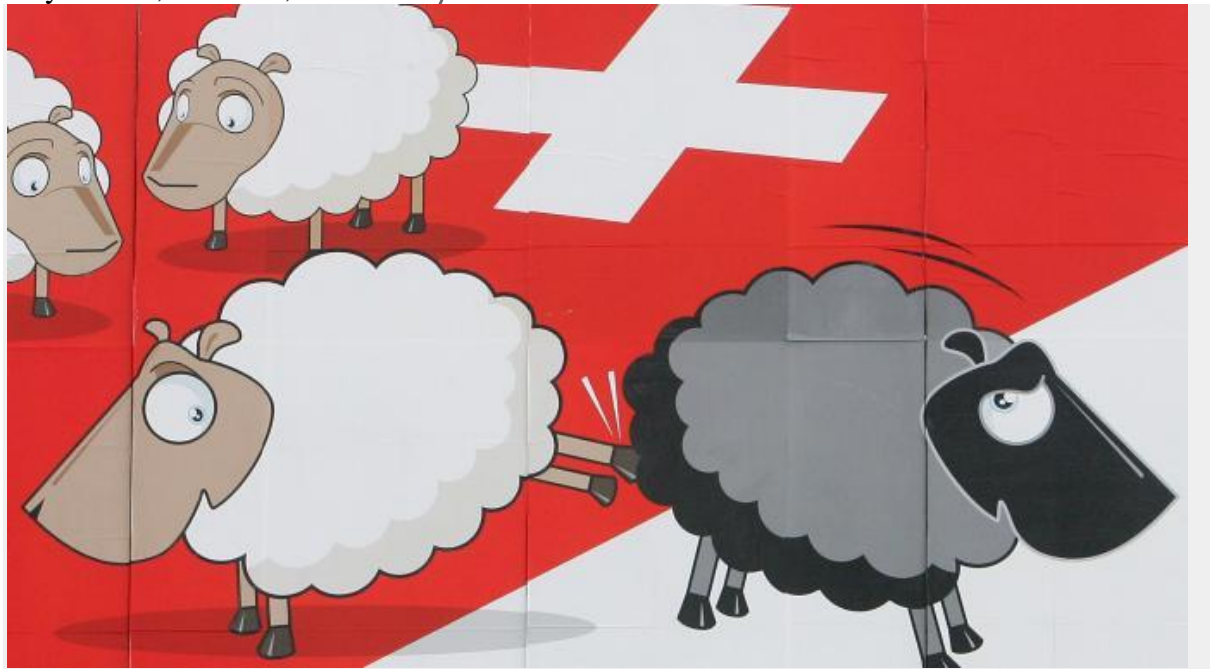


Swiss right wing urges Britain to join its immigration fight with EU

Michael Sheridan, Mannedorf

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Switzerland's SVP has long campaigned against immigration

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The man behind Switzerland's dominant right-wing party, Christoph Blocher, says Britain is fighting on the same side as his country in a battle with the European Union over immigration and free trade.

Blocher, a multimillionaire industrialist, argues that Britain and Switzerland could stand up to the EU in talks to curb the movement of people while keeping free trade.

"You are a very important country for imports and exports to and from the rest of Europe. It's the same thing for Switzerland," he said, adding that both nations had strong economies, big financial sectors and a global outlook.

A vocal admirer of Winston Churchill, Blocher, 75, guided the Swiss People's party (SVP) from the fringes of respectability to a key role in the coalition government.

"In the end the issues are the same — freedom, democracy and the sovereignty of nations," he said in an interview. "I am for working together but based on sovereign national states."

Blocher seemed invigorated as he discussed the post-Brexit future at his office in Mannedorf, a picture-postcard village on the shores of Lake Zurich that embodies tidiness and order.

He said the SVP wanted Switzerland to negotiate a free trade agreement with Britain as soon as it could.

Switzerland faces a constitutional deadline in February next year to reach a new deal with the EU after its people voted in a referendum in 2014 to limit the number of immigrants from the union.

The government in Bern has no room to manoeuvre. Under the Swiss system of direct democracy, power rests with 5.2m eligible voters. The immigration poll — won by just 50.3% — is binding.

“This is the main issue, not only in Switzerland, not only in England but in France, Italy, Germany, Poland — this is the biggest problem being talked about by people everywhere,” Blocher said.

He said the Swiss government told its citizens that EU immigration would be only 8,000-10,000 people a year, but the figure was now 10 times that.

“Every five years a town the size of Zurich is arriving in Switzerland,” he said. “Switzerland has about 25% foreigners among its 8m population, which is considerably more than England.”

No crisis seems at hand in Männedorf where life is regulated by the quality of the flowerbeds, the peal of church bells and the trains gliding alongside the sparkling lake.

Nonetheless, the SVP has benefited from fears among the Swiss public that their safe and prosperous way of life is under threat.

Blocher, now a vice-president of the SVP, called it “an old conservative party”, not an insurgency such as the National Front in France or Italy’s Five Star Movement.

But it has welcomed Brexit as a blow to the cosy assumptions of the Swiss establishment about striking a deal with Brussels.

“It is clear the search for a solution has not been made easier by the United Kingdom’s decision to leave the EU,” conceded Johann Schneider-Ammann, the Swiss president.

Less diplomatically, Blocher said — with apparent relish — that a breakdown was inevitable.

“I think the EU will stand firm and they won’t enter into real negotiations and I think Switzerland will have a unilateral solution based on Swiss laws to change the system and have controlled immigration.” he said.

The Swiss foreign ministry declined to comment.

“We are not a racist party,” Blocher said, “we are not against foreigners.”

Switzerland has taken in migrants from many lands, including many Muslims from the Balkans. But Blocher said there were limits, pointing to a referendum decision in 2009 to ban minarets.

“Minarets mean: ‘I am here, I will command’,” he said. “That, we will not have.”