

Turning round the telescope. Centre-right parties and immigration and integration policy in Europe

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Politics Matters: a Conclusion

Tim Bale

In 2006 *Eurobarometer* asked respondents throughout the EU-25 whether they agreed or disagreed that immigrants contributed a lot to their country. There were big differences according to occupation and education: only around four out of ten people in managerial positions disagreed compared to nearly six out of ten manual workers; the difference between those who left school before sixteen and those educated past their twentieth birthday was almost exactly the same. There were also, as Table 1 shows, big differences between countries – not only between the EU-15 and new member states, but within the EU-15, some of whose centre-right parties we examine in this volume.

Table 1 about here

Another obvious difference was ideological. As previous research has indicated, some of it referred to elsewhere this volume – see especially the contributions on France and the Netherlands – those Europeans who consider themselves right wing are clearly less sanguine about migration than their fellow citizens who think of themselves as on the left. Even if political parties' role in public policy on immigration and integration, then, is reduced to their being 'conduits of public opinion' (see the introduction to this volume), we would therefore expect those parties on the centre-right – Christian democrats, conservatives and market liberals – to feed

in the feelings of ‘their voters’ into the process and, presuming the process is even minimally responsive to their efforts, tip it in a more restrictive direction.

But parties are more than merely conduits. They help structure as well as reflect voter opinion – not only in terms of what citizens think but also what they think about (see Thomassen, 2005): they respond to pressure but they also help cue, channel and even ramp it up. Even if there were no ‘rational’ incentives for them to stake out positions in advance of those held by their supporters (see Iversen, 1994), the fact that they may well do so should come as no surprise. Parties are, after all, populated by individuals who are themselves ideological, sharing the gut instincts of their supporters – and sometimes even more so. The somewhat populist image of a ‘political class’ of mainstream, essentially centrist, leaders that spends most of its time holding back or even selling out atavistic party activists and an only slightly more reasonable electorate is highly misleading. Tests of May’s so-called law of curvilinear disparity – the scientific version of this image – suggest, with very few exceptions (see Kitschelt, 1989 and Kennedy et al., 2006) that there is no such thing: activists can be moderates just as determined to do well in elections as to preserve ideological purity, while elites are often true believers (see Norris, 1995, Narud and Skare, 1999 and Widfeldt, 1999). Inasmuch, then, as those elites, especially when they are in government, are able to steer the ship of state, they are likely to try and steer it in their preferred direction.

We all know, of course, that, to pursue the old analogy, the state is very much a super-tanker not a speedboat – a ship that takes time to respond to touches on the tiller and which, especially in Europe, has to take account of the administrative and legal sea in

which it sails. We also know that the command structure, such as it is, of the state is far less clear-cut than its nautical analogue: the captaincy is likely to be collective, forced to work with imprecise charts, a vague and changing idea of destination, and a crew that can neither be relied upon co-ordinate its work nor to translate orders from the bridge to actions in the engine room, even presuming there is enough fuel to make them effective. And all the while the passengers, many of whom believe that the vessel is about to run aground and – like some of the crew – think they could do a better job, are shouting insults and advice. Yet, for all that, it seems intuitively unlikely that who is in charge – albeit nominally and temporarily – has little or no bearing on policy making and policy change.

This led to the first question raised in the first contribution to this volume. Are parties more important to migration policy than they are traditionally given credit for, and should policy and party people pay more attention to each other in this and perhaps other areas? But we also asked other, related questions. How much is the role and behaviour of centre-right parties in particular more than a function of the threat posed by parties on their far-right flank? And what are the internal tensions and dilemmas they face? Clearly our efforts can only produce a first-cut, but what have we found?

Do parties make a policy difference?

On the question of the role that parties play in making and shifting state policy on immigration control and immigrant integration, perhaps the most obvious example is one of the countries covered by Green-Pedersen and Odmalm. Their account of the

divergence in policy between Denmark (where policy has tightened considerably since the centre-right took office in 2001) and Sweden (where it is only just beginning to show signs of tightening after the victory of the centre right in 2006) clearly suggests that parties do indeed make a difference. The Social Democratic government that lost power in Denmark was clearly under pressure, and of course no-one can say for sure how it would have responded to increased anxieties about radical Islam and the continuing climb of the Danish People's Party (DPP), but few would argue that the policy mix pursued by the centre-right administration that replaced it would have been quite so enthusiastically pursued. Certainly, Sweden's admittedly more powerful centre-left did nothing to emulate its Nordic neighbour across the Kattegat.

The most detailed evidence of party involvement – and disputes – over migration policy comes in the process-tracing exercise carried out by Geddes in order to examine a classic dilemma in the literature, namely continued mass immigration despite attempts to control it. Geddes does not ignore the other players in the process – business groups, the church and charities – but shows how both worked alongside a small Christian Democratic party that was able to use its membership of a potentially fissiparous coalition to dilute proposals that came about, not as an inevitable response to objective conditions or even public anxiety about those conditions, but because of the partisan promises of two of its fellow coalition partners. That the latter were able to make the running was also due to what appears to have been a conscious decision of the senior partner in the coalition to allow them their head (see below).

Party politics also made a difference, according to Hough and Boswell, in Germany – although often the difference is more significant at the level of outputs rather than outcomes. The CDU-CSU government that ran the Federal Republic throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s made several attempts to make more of a reality of Germany’s self image as ‘not a country of immigration’; most of them may have been in vain, but not through want of trying. Likewise, it is clear from their account that once in opposition the CDU-CSU was able to use its growing veto power to, in its view, mitigate the attempts of the SPD-Green coalition that took over under Gerhard Schröder to extend citizenship and rationalise labour migration.

In France, where governments enjoy a much freer rein than their German counterparts, policy seems to vary according to who is in charge. Things are slightly more complicated, however, by the fact that the country’s semi-presidential system means that they turn not just on party but on personality. Marthaler’s contribution is an illustration of this, showing how French policy on immigration and integration has been heavily influenced in recent years by the ambitions, thinking and response to public opinion of the man who is now its president. If the politics of migration is, like all politics, the interplay of institutions, ideas and individuals, then the literature – even that on France – has perhaps concentrated too much on the first two and underplayed the third.

Van Kersbergen and Krouwel concentrate more on party competition and positioning than they do on government policy making, partly because they take it as read that the change of government that occurred after the post-Fortuyn election of 2002 prompted

big changes in government policy that might otherwise not have occurred. The liberal-conservative VVD, which uniquely was part of both the outgoing and the incoming government, had, when in coalition, with the Dutch Labour Party, found it all but impossible to shift migration policy. Once together with the Christian Democrats (and very briefly with the populist LPF) it oversaw policy change change that has placed the Netherlands, along with Denmark, in the vanguard of European states determined not only to improve control but to insist on the improved integration of those (already) allowed in (see Joppke, 2007). Put bluntly, while it is misleading to think that there was little public anxiety about such matters pre-9/11 and pre-Pim Fortuyn, and to think that Dutch governments took no practical notice of it before 2002, changes in state policy – or at least the palpable acceleration of such changes that were already occurring – required a change of government.

This volume does, however, contain one contribution that casts doubt on the difference made by the partisan occupation of office. Smith argues that in both the UK and Ireland contemporary and historical experience suggests that, for all the rhetorical jousting (more a feature in the UK than in Ireland), migration policy has not nor would not vary much according to which party or coalition were in power. In the UK, partly because it is so concerned not to cede too big an advantage to the Conservative Party on the issue of immigrant control, Labour has for decades tried to sound (if not always act) as tough as the Tories, while the Tories have always been wary of pursuing their populist impulses too far lest they alienate moderate opinion and damage what used to be called ‘race relations’. That said, Conservative governments have often acted, especially in their first year or two in office, to tighten

controls – a pattern that may be repeated when they next get into government. In Ireland, the consensus identified by Smith is more permissive and, some would say pragmatic. It would seem (and understandably so given Ireland's economic renaissance and the relative lack of public anxiety on the issues) that most mainstream parties take an 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it' stance, unless and until something does appear to need fixing (as with the changes to the Citizenship Law in 2004), in which case they combine to fix it fairly rapidly.

Finally, on this question, Duncan and Van Hecke's contribution on the transnational centre-right obviously has less to tell us about the actuality of party influence on policy. But it may tell us something about the potential for it as policy becomes more subject to decision making at the EU-level. If they are right, and if behaviour in the EP reflects the positions of the transnational federations and parliamentary party groups (which is admittedly a big if), then we should expect to find that party makes less of a difference when it comes to immigration control and more of a difference when it comes to integration policy, with centre-right parties significantly less enthusiastic than their Green, left and centre-left counterparts about multiculturalism.

Is it all down to radical-right wing populists?

On the question of the centre-right's move shift policy in a more restrictive and more assimilationist (or at least less multiculturalist) direction being driven largely by prompting from the far right, the contributions to this volume at least question and qualify the common wisdom. Policy being a response to the far-right is probably

most evident in France, where, of course, radical rightists stand virtually no chance of winning seats in parliament, let alone the presidency itself. In her attempt to contextualize the policy changes wrought by Nicolas Sarkozy, Marthaler suggests that a lot of them derive from the candidate's understanding of what would give him, and the party he managed to pull together around himself, the best chance of winning the Presidential election in 2007 – one seen in the context of the previous contest that saw the Front National give the mainstream right (and left) something between a scare and a bloody nose. Sarkozy believed not so much that the FN was likely to make further advances but that, by going on to Le Pen's territory in word as much as in deed, he could usefully bring back millions of voters who had lent the FN their support in 2007. Intra-party politics, however, was just as important: adopting both legislation and a tone that distinguished him from the much smoother, more establishment de Villepin also helps explain Sarkozy's moves. So too does the defeat of the Constitutional Treaty, where concerns about immigration were considered to have lent support to the victorious no camp. Such considerations appear to have played a part in his dropping, or at least downplaying, his earlier concern to balance – British-style – a concern to beef up control with a stress on combating discrimination and promoting integration. Yet Marthaler also highlights throughout the importance of public opinion, and in particular the fact that Sarkozy, by acting and sounding tough on immigration, knows he is appealing not just to French people who classify themselves as on the far right but to the much larger number who see themselves in the right and centre of the political spectrum.

Another case where, on the face of it, radical right-wing populists have helped to push policy in a more restrictive direction without formally entering government is in Denmark. But, as Green-Pedersen and Odmalm show, the critical juncture occurred not when the centre-right parties made it into power in 2001 and were obliged to rely on the Danish People's Party for legislative support but instead in the early to mid 1990s. First, the two centre right parties broke with the government over *easing asylum policy for Bosnian refugees*. Then the leader of the conservative *Venstre* (future Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen) decided that a focus on immigration could help him overcome the social democratic government that was proving difficult to attack on the socio-economic front. Since taking and holding on to power (from 2001 up to and including the election in November 2007), Denmark's centre-right, as Green-Pedersen and Odmalm show, has profoundly altered the course of the country's immigration and integration policy – all the more so when compared to Sweden, where the populist right has had much less electoral impact and, by the same token, cannot explain various centre-right parties occasionally flirting with a harder line on migration and multiculturalism over the last decade. Clearly maintaining a legislative (though not an executive coalition) has meant that the centre-right in Denmark has had to look over its shoulder on such issues. But for Green-Pedersen and Odmalm, it was a development on the left flank that was just as significant, namely the defection of the Social Liberals from the bourgeois to the Social Democrat camp in 1993 – a decision that removed the coalition constraint which until then had prevented the centre-right from mobilising on migration issues.

The other case in which radical right-wing populist parties have made a difference is the Netherlands, where such parties stand as good a chance as any of their counterparts in other countries of making into parliament. But again their contribution to policy change has to be contextualised and qualified. There, as van Kersbergen and Krouwel show, Pim Fortuyn (and now others) tapped into, legitimated and enlarged a well of resentment and anxiety about migration and multiculturalism that now helps structure political competition as much as the traditional class cleavage and its largely socio-economic issue dimension. Interestingly, however, they also make clear that Dutch centre-right parties stand to benefit from taking a tough stance on the ‘foreigners’ issue’ because they are ‘the traditional owners of law and order as well as nationalist issues’ with voters who by and large favour such a stance. They also show that one of the parties they examine, the conservative-liberal VVD, flirted with the ‘foreigners issue’ long before the Fortuyn revolt but was constrained by worries over internal unity and the negative impact on its (unusual) coalition with the Dutch Labour Party. That the second constraint came off was no less important than the cabinet presence of LPF ministers in the cabinet after 2002 in moving the VVD towards a more restrictive and less multiculturalist line. It is also clear from Van Kersbergen and Krouwel’s account that a similar move did not pose the Christian Democrats as much of a problem as one might have predicted, their leadership finding little difficulty reaching back into the parties own traditions to justify a harder line.

Italy, of course, presents an interesting case in that the harder line pursued by a centre-right government can be traced unambiguously to radical right wing populists (or former radical right wing populists) that were part of the coalition. Indeed, Geddes’s

account makes it clear that – at least in the initial stages – Berlusconi and his Forza Italia colleagues virtually left Bossi’s Lega Nord (still stridently populist) and Fini’s Alleanza Nazionale (trying to transform itself into a more mainstream conservative party) to get on with working up new immigration legislation themselves. This may have been because the Prime Minister had other more pressing matters to attend to – some interpret his entry into politics mainly as an attempt to ensure the protection of his commercial interests and legal freedom. But almost certainly it owed a great deal to his concern to avoid a repeat of the Lega walkout that effectively brought down his previous government. Even once the internal bargaining that eventually saw the legislation seriously diluted had begun, Forza Italia appears to have avoided interfering. Indeed, it seems to have relied on its other coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Ccd-Cdu, to ensure that the economic interests of its supporters in continued immigration were catered for. Again, though, we should note that in supporting the idea that ‘something must be done’ about immigrants and immigration and then trying (albeit perhaps half-heartedly) to do it, Forza Italia was aiming not so much to spike the guns of parties on its right flank as cater to the concerns of its own supporters who, the polling reproduced by Geddes shows, were just as worried about the issue as supporters of those other parties.

Our other case studies suggest that pressure generated by the far right had very little or no impact on the increasingly hard line taken by the parties concerned. Boswell and Hough stress that Germany’s centre-right politicians, especially given the numbers coming in and the obvious ‘failure’ to integrate so many of the country’s foreign population, were driven to act by their own, ideological, reading of the

situation. Politicising migration might also believe help them regain some of the voters lost not to the far-right but to the SPD. Likewise, in the UK, Smith finds little evidence to suggest that the Conservative Party was or is overly concerned about losses to its right, simply convinced that it had an advantage over the Labour government) on the issue, though one it had to be careful (especially as that government took an increasingly restrictive stance itself) not to push too far lest it reinforce its image as the 'nasty' party.

Meanwhile, taking a the bird's eye view offered by studying Europe's transnational party federations, Duncan and Van Hecke reinforce the impression that centre-right parties are more restrictive than those on the left, though, owing to the latter's increased stress on control, the difference is more noticeable on immigrant integration. But they see no signs of parties on the centre-right being dragged any closer to far-right positions. If more policy on this area does get made not just at the European level but via a more communitized process where Parliament becomes a player, then it will not be easy to put down any toughening of control or integration policies to the influence of extreme politicians pushing their supposedly reluctant mainstream counterparts into action.

What are the tensions and dilemmas experienced by centre-right parties?

On the question of internal dilemmas, we found plenty. They are most clearly crystallised and explicitly laid out by Boswell and Hough, who build on work on political opportunity structure to typologise the risks faced by centre-right parties

seeking to politicize immigration control and immigrant integration policy. Aside from the possibility that such a move will increase the salience of an issue that may actually favour competitors further to the right, they posit three risks: first, a risk to the party's 'value legitimacy' – a sense that its rhetoric and programme remains in the same essentially moderate, catch-all space occupied by most of its supporters; second, a risk to its 'programmatically coherence' – a sense that what it does on these issues does not undermine its policies in other, often related areas; third, a risk to its 'practical credibility' – a sense that the party is able to deliver on what it promises. The CDU-CSU has been tempted, both by conviction and hopes of strategic advantage, to take a consistently harder line but it has had to be careful. While public opinion in general is unlikely to condemn the party for its ethnonationalist rhetoric, pushing things too far can cause problems with its more liberal and church-based support. Meanwhile, calls and attempts to toughen Germany's line risk disrupting relationships with foreign countries, contradicting moves towards a more liberal economic policy, and the country's traditional support for further Europeanisation. Lastly, attempts to be business- and of course coalition-friendly, have and may continue to undermine the parties' ability to match tough words with action, as will Germany's culture of consensus and compromise.

Dilemmas also abound in the Dutch case. Indeed so extreme have they been in this policy area that they have led to the disintegration of the country's formidable and (failing a grand coalition of the sort that currently governs the country) seemingly pivotal conservative-liberal party, the VVD. The party's problems exemplify one potential conflict in centre-right parties, namely the one between an impulse towards

liberalism (primarily but not solely in the economic sphere) and an impulse toward cultural and social conservatism. For the VVD, van Kersbergen and Krouwel's analysis of the clustering of parties and public opinion makes clear, it has proved increasingly difficult to reconcile the two impulses under the one roof, leading on two occasions now to high-profile politicians not simply leaving and slamming the door behind them but setting up shop in new premises. Geert Wilders going to take up the torch of Pim Fortuyn was perhaps predictable and the damage possibly temporary, but the departure of Rita Verdonk may be a more serious blow. On the other hand, things are unlikely to be plain-sailing for the CDA, especially if it wishes to carry on moving in a more neo-liberal economic direction; its policy on, for example, the freedom to found and maintain religious schools and its encouragement of voluntary self-organization, may come under pressure if anxieties about Islamic separatism carry on increasing.

France's centre-right party does not, it seem, currently suffer too much from internal division on immigration control, integration and asylum, although there were objections from within the UMP government to the 2007 legislation allowing for DNA testing of applicants for migration on the grounds of family unification. Again, though, it is possible to see problems on the horizon. If, for instance, Sarkozy really is the economic liberal some still like to hope he is, then there could be a clash between this instinct and the desire to control entry, even if the latter is geared more to the labour market as Sarkozy clearly wants. And if, now he has won the presidency, he returns to the need to modify the republican commitment to race-blind policies in order to more effectively combat discrimination and promote integration and dialogue

– or simply to enable the state to get a better idea of the problems it faces by collecting improved information – then he could face a backlash from within.

For Italy's centre-right, now out of power, the internal contradictions were mainly inter-party (ie inter-bloc) rather than intra-party. As Geddes' shows, the Christian Democratic party within the *Casa delle Libertà*, the Ccd-Cdu, managed – between the talk and division phases – to mitigate some of its partners' plans, with the support not just of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and (associated) migrant charities but also of organized business interests, some of which were almost certainly speaking for constituencies represented by Forza Italia and the populist Lega Nord. Even the latter, he shows, was prepared to swap concessions in substance for more repressive symbolic proposals such as naval intervention and biometric testing. Meanwhile, Gianfranco Fini's desire to reposition himself (and his party) as the leader of the centre-right in the post-Berlusconi and post Forza-Italia era (assuming that comes) meant that he was prepared to countenance the granting of extended rights to immigrants to promote integration. Again (and one can see this in the counter-reaction Fini's suggestion provoked within his own party and outside it), that there may be problems in the future as *Alleanza* continues its halting progress towards centre-right 'respectability'. The recent furore over Romanian/Roma immigrants in Italy tempted the man *The Economist* (8 November 2007) chose as a result to label 'the supposedly reformed leader of the former neo-fascists' into accusing the newcomers of 'prostituting their womenfolk, approving the kidnapping of children and believing that theft was morally justified' suggesting, it claimed, that the ambitious Mr Fini 'appears to think that race-hate oratory will enhance his prospects.'

Green-Pedersen and Odalm's contribution does not tell us much about the dilemmas and tensions faced by the Danish centre-right over its government's tightening of policy, although one would presume that some in the business community would have concerns. Certainly, there were fears – only partially realised – that both government parties would lose votes in 2007 to the New Alliance which, at least initially, pitched itself as a home for those voters who wanted centre-right policies on much else but were tired, not to say embarrassed, about relying on the xenophobic DPP. Their examination of the four centre-right parties in Sweden that managed to knit together the pre-electoral coalition that won power in 2006, however, again illustrates that immigration and integration can be a potentially troublesome area for that side of the political spectrum. Rather than allow it to disrupt their carefully contrived 'Alliance for Sweden', they downplayed it to the point of disappearance during the campaign. Interestingly, however, their victory has resulted in substantive changes to policy which Green-Pedersen and Odalm consider significant, and a sign that the two countries will not remain quite as far apart from each other on the issues as, in part dictated by the realities of coalition-building, they have been.

In the other comparative contribution (on the UK and Ireland), however, Smith does dig into the tensions faced by centre-right parties, particularly when in opposition. In both countries, those parties have found it difficult in recent years to disagree with government policy without risking being portrayed as either more extreme than they want to be (as in the UK) or simply wasting their time (as in Ireland). Given reduced anxiety about asylum seekers in particular, the debate has tended to shift to economic

migration, for which both the Conservatives and Fine Gael acknowledge the need – and which is of course impossible to promise to stop when most of it comes from the EU. Although some in the Conservative Party continue to argue that immigration is a button that should be pressed because the Tories retain a clear lead on the issue in opinion polls, the watchword now appears to be proceed with caution. It may enthrall voters – many of whom, contrary to common wisdom, would never consider them as core supporters of the party – but it also risks setting back the leadership’s relatively successful attempt since 2005 to ‘decontaminate’ the Tory brand and attract more centrist support. The answer to the dilemma thus posed seems to lie in banking the Tories’ tougher reputation on the issue and moving the attack onto the government’s supposed lack of competence and credibility rather than principle. Fine Gael, albeit operating in a country where there appears to be less concern than in the UK, has also taken the same ‘valence politics’ approach. Interestingly, however, none what Smith characterises as Ireland’s three centre-right parties seems interested in emulating the more restrictive policies of some of its fellow member states – although nationalism in Ireland is traditionally important, there seems to be no mileage in breaking what is a permissive consensus around the arrival of thousands of migrants.

The dilemmas for parties at the transnational level explored by Duncan and Van Hecke can seem less pressing, but only if one continues to cling to the arguably outdated idea that what European federations and parliamentary party do and say has little real impact. The most obvious of these is the need to ensure some minimal congruence between stances taken ‘domestically’ and those adopted to achieve not just transnational harmony but also concrete legislation at a European level.

Interestingly, Duncan and Van Hecke conclude that there already appears to be basis for such congruence. Whether, though, this can last as more policy is made at the EU-level – and especially if the media in member states break the habit of a lifetime and pay more attention to the potential contradictions and alliances thrown up – remains to be seen.

Putting it all together

The contributions to this volume suggest, then, that there are a number of common tensions faced by centre-right parties seeking to make policy and compete electorally on immigration control and integration. A hard line can often be reconciled with a tradition of defending the nation and its culture from external threats, and also seems to make sense in many countries given evident public anxiety. But there is both a business case and a religious (or at least charitable or humane) case for a more liberal policy. Moreover, the latter can also make sense from an electoral and particularly a coalitional point of view. The contributions also suggest that centre-right parties, although clearly they have to take into account the electoral performance – potential and actual – of the populist radical right, are more than capable of thinking, talking and acting for themselves on immigration control and integration. Finally, the contributions suggest that it may well be worthwhile remembering parties have a potentially significant impact on policy in this area – and that they will continue to do so even as it progresses beyond the nation-state.

To date, the evidence for parties making a difference to public policy has largely been gathered from, and argued about in the political economy tradition (see, for example, Bradely et al., 2003, Allan and Scruggs, 2004, Amable et al., 2006, and Nygård, 2006). But it can be found elsewhere, outside of the public and particularly welfare spending that lends itself so easily to quantitative investigation. Even though the results of a first pass by other scholars are mixed (see Givens and Luedtke, 2005), policy on immigrant control and integration is, we believe, one such field. The twenty-first century has seen a great deal of policy change. Clearly, that change can in part be traced back to interest groups or Europeanization. But it also results from the control (and the quest for control) of government by parties – institutions that respond and contribute not just to public opinion but to the physical flows and cultural clashes (perceived and real) that underlie it. Politics matters.

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Table 1 Proportion of people disagreeing that 'immigrants contribute a lot' to their country, 2006

By country	% disagreeing
New Member States	64
Germany	63
Italy	53
EU-25	52
Denmark	52
EU-15	50
France	46
UK	45
Netherlands	41
Ireland	30
Sweden	16
By ideological self-placement	
Right-wing	58
Centrist	53
Left-wing	44

Source: *Eurobarometer*, 66 (2007)