A new report shows a sharp rise in the numbers of migrants worldwide. In many cases, it makes economic sense for richer countries to accept workers from poorer ones. But even countries that traditionally welcome immigrants are having doubts.

Across Western Europe, there are few more emotive topics than migration, and particularly the growing numbers of asylum-seekers. For those on the left, these are deserving cases: if they are not victims of a repressive regime, then they are victims of both old-fashioned colonialism and the new imperialism of globalisation. Those on the right, in contrast, point out that more than 80% of asylum-seekers have their claims rejected, argue that the country “cannot afford” to be so generous in admitting immigrants and allege that they bring with them crime and disease. In a number of Western European countries, extreme-right political parties have recently made electoral gains by tapping into popular worries about immigration. A report published on Tuesday June 10th by the International Organisation for Migration shows that the numbers abandoning their home country in search of a better life elsewhere are soaring: since the mid-1960s the numbers of migrants worldwide has more than doubled to 175m, or almost 3% of the world population.

Across the world, rich countries are struggling with the question of illegal migration, though the reasons why it worries governments differ from country to country. The United States of America was built on immigration and remains relatively open to skilled migrants. Moreover, the country turns a blind eye to huge swathes of illegal immigrants, especially Mexican migrant labourers, who have enough legal compatriots to affect electoral outcomes in key states like California and Texas. Moreover, since America has a more restricted welfare system than those in most European states, there is no feeling that taxpayers’ money is being lavished on asylum-seekers, and thus no widespread resentment that the country’s hospitality is being abused.

However, Americans have become increasingly worried about the effects of their relatively open-doors policy on their security. Asylum procedures were dramatically tightened after an asylum-seeker was found to have been responsible for the first bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993. Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11th 2001, perpetrated by 19 Arab men, America has tightened its broader immigration policies. The fact that many of the men had lived and studied in America generated a wave of outrage that they had taken advantage of America’s openness.

Even neighbouring Canada, one of the most liberal regimes for asylum-seekers (it both allows them to work and to have access to the country’s generous welfare benefits), has tightened its regime. It recently
negotiated an agreement with America whereby it could send back any asylum-seeker who attempted to enter Canada through a safe third country (as those travelling by land must have done). And even Canada suffered a backlash against immigration when, during the 1990s, there was a huge influx of Hong Kong Chinese.

Australia—like Canada and America, a country built largely on immigration from Europe—also likes to claim that it is a generous recipient of asylum-seekers. But, thanks to its geography, few make it as far as Australia. And, when they do, as 433 Afghans fleeing the Taliban in a sinking boat found in 2001, Australia is not so keen to take them. In that case, John Howard, the Australian prime minister, tried to discourage the captain of a passing Norwegian ship from rescuing them, as he was obliged to do under international marine regulations, and then did his best to keep the ship out of Australian territorial waters. He won a subsequent election fought on the slogan: “We decide who comes to this country”. So much for the boast, in Australia’s national anthem, that, “For those who’ve come across the seas, we’ve boundless plains to share”.

However, it is in Western Europe that the issue of migration is most contentious. Europe needs migrant labour because of its ageing population. Britain’s National Health Service, which is one of the European Union’s largest employers, would collapse were it not for the large numbers of immigrant doctors, nurses and ancillary staff that keep it going. However, despite needing foreign workers, many Western European countries maintain such tough anti-immigration policies that many migrants from poorer countries resort to claiming asylum, seeing it as their best chance of being allowed to stay and work. Because many are not really fleeing persecution, the general perception that many asylum-seekers are “bogus”, in the words of one British politician, is an accurate one. Moreover, the asylum system is hugely expensive: Britain alone spends £3 billion ($5 billion) each year, more than four times the entire budget of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. And many immigrants, particularly Muslims, are seen as not sharing liberal Western values, such as those encouraging the education of women. This feeling of intolerance of others’ perceived intolerance was a main reason for the rise of the late Pim Fortuyn in the usually ultra-liberal Netherlands.

The European Union is trying to work out a coherent immigration policy to be applied across its 15 member states. Earlier this month, the European Commission, the EU’s executive, came up with a carrot-and-stick proposal. On the one hand, the Commission urged member states to do more to integrate legal migrants, who remain poorer and with less attractive prospects than their indigent compatriots, often even into the second generation (so factors like language are not to blame). The Commission has also advocated much better systems for combating illegal immigration, including a pan-European visa database, fingerprints in passports, and tighter border controls. All of these matters will be debated at an EU summit in Greece later this month.

How much will be decided is another matter. Greece, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU, and which therefore largely influences the agenda, has said that it wants the block to abandon its obsession with keeping unwanted migrants out and concentrate on how to attract the workers that its ageing population needs. But many EU leaders will be fearful of the popular backlash that such a radical change, however economically justified, might cause.