

The Restrictionist Obstacle to Immigration Reform

(Second of a series)

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It has been said once too often—America is a nation of immigrants. Nearly everyone can trace his or her origin from another country. Immigrants infuse America with new blood, making it a stronger and more progressive nation.

But despite the many positive contributions of immigrants, there are still some pockets of resistance to genuine immigration reform. Some people believe that immigration is not good for America and must, therefore, be restricted.

Restrictionists in Congress

From the restrictionist perspective, any change in immigration laws must be toward limiting the entry of foreign individuals. There are quite a number of lawmakers in Congress who represent the restrictionists, such as House Majority Leader Tom De Lay (R-TX), Representative Lamar Smith (R-TX) and, the most outspoken of them all, Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO).

In a recent *Los Angeles Times* news report on the release of a detailed guest worker proposal from the White House, DeLay and Smith were quoted to be pushing for tougher border security measures and deferred action on the guest worker program.

Some moderate Republicans, on the other hand, are willing to sit down and talk about a guest worker program that still do not address the need to overhaul the immigration system.

In May 1999, the restrictionists in the House of Representatives formed a group called Immigration Reform Caucus (the "Caucus"). The Caucus agenda was briefly boosted by the hysteria that followed the September 11 attacks. It is apparently poised to address a number of immigration issues, including: tightening border control; denying American citizenship to children of undocumented migrants born in the US; reducing the number of immigrants allowed into the US; and requiring the state and local officials to share information on undocumented aliens with the federal government.

Restrictionist Organizations

Outside Congress, several organizations like the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR), the Center for Immigration Studies, the Immigration Reform Law Institute (the litigation arm of FAIR) and Team America (of which Rep. Tancredo is the founding chairman), are propagating the need to restrict immigration further and to come down strongly on undocumented migrants.

FAIR, in its own words, for instance, is seeking to "improve border security, to stop illegal immigration, and to promote immigration levels consistent with the national interest—more traditional rates of about 300,000 a year." FAIR espouses the enforcement of existing immigration laws and new technologies to put an end to illegal immigration and further seeks to set legal immigration at the "lowest possible levels" consistent with the national interest.

At first glance, those who want to close the US borders to immigration appear to be raising legitimate points against immigration. The underlying principle behind the restrictionist agenda, however, may well be a new form of nativism, or worse, racism.

FAIR, for instance, is known to have been funded by the same people who support white supremacist groups, according to a July/August 2005 *Immigration Law Today* article. FAIR founder, John Tanton, reportedly authored a memo lamenting the declining power and control of the whites, while FAIR Executive Director Dan Stein was quoted to have mentioned "competitive breeding" of certain immigrant groups.

Shades of Restrictionism

An article by Tom Barry in the *Immigration Daily* describes the distinguishing ideologies of four general groups within the restrictionist movement.

The paleoconservatives constitute a group who are opposed to immigration on the ground that the influx of foreign-born individuals "dilutes" America's national identity and will lead to the "disintegration of American culture."

The neoconservatives, on the other hand, recognize that America stands to gain from the migration of cheap and skilled workers but strongly oppose multiculturalism and affirmative action.

The third group comprises the so-called "border vigilantes" who have fashioned themselves as patriots protecting America from the onslaught of illegal aliens.

Lastly, state anti-immigration groups such as those found in California and Arizona have persistently lobbied for such measures as requiring proof of citizenship or immigration status and denying social services to undocumented migrants.

No-Fear Immigration Reform

The White House release of a detailed guest worker program is boosting public expectation that Congress will be deliberating immigration reform over the next few weeks. Although there is a consensus that immigration reform is of utmost importance because the system is terribly broken, the question as to what reforms to pursue remains a polarizing issue.

Restrictionists are doing their bit to oppose genuine immigration reform by claiming that there is currently a phenomenon of "mass immigration" to America. They argue that unless controlled, "mass immigration" will cause exponential population growth, depress US wages and strain its economic, social and environmental resources.

These baseless arguments, if not exposed for what they really are, will likely prey on the fears of the unemployed and poorly-educated sectors of the American public, and become an obstacle to immigration reform. There are several immigration-related bills in Congress and all of them purportedly seek immigration reform, even if some of them are actually restrictionist in orientation. It will not be easy to identify which is the genuine immigration reform proposal.

As Deborah Notkin, President of the American Immigration Lawyers Association said, the campaign for immigration reform will be a "battle for the hearts and minds" of the American people. We must spare no effort in overcoming the restrictionist obstacle to genuine immigration reform.