

# Immigration

## *The Ultimate Environmental Issue*

BY RICHARD D. LAMM

**E**very generation has its challenges, almost inevitably challenges different from that of their parents. The great challenge of public policy is to correctly identify the new challenges and the new realities that society is faced with. Public policy is a kaleidoscope, and time changes the patterns we are faced with and we have to be wise enough to react to the new challenges as these new patterns evolve.

One new pattern/challenge must be to look at the issue of the environment with new eyes. Our globe is under new dramatic environmental pressure: our globe is warming, our ice caps melting, our glaciers receding, our coral is dying, our soils are eroding, our water tables falling, our fisheries are being depleted, our remaining rainforests shrinking. Something is very, very wrong with our eco-system. The environment issue is hydra-headed and complicated, but it is of immense importance that we have all aspects of the issue on the table.

One issue in the current environmental debate, however, is strangely absent: immigration. Immigration is the ultimate environmental issue,



Gov. Richard Lamm

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*Richard C. Lamm, former governor of Colorado, directs the Center for Public Policy and Contemporary Issues at the University of Denver.*

but the U.S. environmental leaders are AWOL on this issue. The U.S. with low immigration will stabilize its population at about 350 million shortly after the middle of this century. With current levels of immigration the United States will double in size and then double again. The Census projections call for an America of 420 million people by 2050 and a billion by the end of this Century.<sup>1</sup> Can you imagine the eco-system, already under great strain, with 1 billion consuming Americans? Our current immigration policy is leaving our grandchildren an unsustainable America of a billion people, which I suggest is public policy malpractice.

“Is there a scenario where a billion Americans at the end of this Century would live in an environmental sound America? Have you been to China? India? We could do everything on the current environmental agenda yet still have an unlivable nation.”

The environmental community wouldn't tell you this (though most know). A combination of political correctness and the recent tendency of the environmental leadership to play Democratic politics have silenced the almost universal recognition of the early environmental community that population was an indispensable part of Environmentalism.

Environmental leaders in the 1960s had a formula, I=PAT, which postulated that environmental impact was the sum of *Population, Affluence, and Technology*. To Gaylord Nelson who conceived Earth Day and the early environmental leaders leaving out

Population would be like having a bicycle with only one wheel.<sup>2</sup> Today's environmentalists will discuss U.S. air pollution policy, U.S. Wilderness policy, U.S. water quality policy, U.S. billboard policy, but never a hint of U.S. population policy.

Here's my simple experiment I use on my environmental friends who have tragically lost their voice on population. Assume that I had a magic wand and could wave it and accomplish all the goals of today's environmental leadership, but did nothing about the current immigration rate. Is there a scenario where a billion Americans at the end of this Century would live in an environmental sound America? Have you been to China? India? We could do everything on the current environmental agenda yet still have an unlivable nation. The self-imposed tragedy of the environmental movement in the U.S. is that the current environmental agenda will not get us to an environmental sound America. On the contrary, it locks in a myriad of environmental traumas as the United States careens toward a billion Americans.

There is a concerted effort in the environmental community to keep immigration out of the dialogue. But the subject is so central to the environment that it keeps popping out. The President's Council on Sustainable Development concluded in 1996 "We believe that reducing current immigration levels is a necessity part of working toward sustainability in the United States."<sup>3</sup> National commissions have made similar assessments since 1972.

The National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society, all of which have warned that increasing population and increasing consumption threaten to overshoot the earth's ecological carrying capacity.<sup>4</sup>

In my view most of the historic ways that societies have grown and developed may be obsolete. I believe we are at a great historical turning point that

has to move from the growth paradigm to the sustainability paradigm. Could I be wrong? Of course! But increasingly we are warned by national and international bodies that planet earth is over-driving its headlights and heading for major traumas. Yet one major, indispensable factor is missing from the debate: population.

How could the eco-system, already showing major signs of collapse, handle a billion consuming Americans. Few Americans want to double the size of America and then double it again. Imagine for a minute that we had taken the advice of President Nixon's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future released in 1972.<sup>5</sup> The commis-

sion recommended, among other things, that America act to end illegal immigration and to freeze legal immigration at 400,000 a year. The Commission found that "the health of our country does not depend on population growth, nor does the vitality of business, nor the welfare of the average person." Strong words. Wise words.<sup>6</sup>

Headed by John Rockefeller, the "Rockefeller Commission" as it was known, strongly urged stabilizing the population of the U.S. and asked Americans to get over their "ideological addiction to growth." America at that time had about 200 million Americans, used far less petroleum and had a much smaller "ecological footprint" on the world environment. But the nation didn't listen to the Commission.

It is unfortunate that American policy makers didn't listen. We have added approximately 100 million Americans since the Commission's brave and farsighted declaration. What problem in contemporary America was made better by population growth and immigration asks Professor Al Bartlett? We now have over 300 million Americans, we consume far more non-renewable resources, and our "ecological footprint" is one of the major factors in a deteriorating environment worldwide.



The geometry of population growth is relentless. The first census (in 1790) found 4 million Europeans in America.<sup>7</sup> Two hundred years (1990) later we had approximately 260 million Americans. That means we had six doublings of the original European population. (4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256).



**Rep. Barbara Jordan (D.-Tex.)**  
1936-1996

300 million Americans to live a satisfying life at a decent level of living for the indefinite future? Will our children and grandchildren inherit a decent and livable America? We have not only put this question off limits, we have made it taboo.

This is not an issue of immigrants, but of immigration. What possible public policy advantage would there be to an America of 500 million? Do we lack for people? Do we have too much open space? Too much parkland and recreation? What will 500 million Americans mean to our environment? There are similar non-environmental questions. Do we need a larger military? Are our schools unpopulated? Do we not have enough diversity? Will we live better lives if our cities doubles in size? Does immigration help our health care system? Will doubling our population help us build a more fair and just America? Do you want an America of one billion people? These questions seem to answer themselves.<sup>8</sup>

I do not believe you can have infinite population growth in a finite world. We are living on

Please note that two more doublings give us over a billion people sharing America.

There are a number of people, who postulate that our current population of 300 million Americans is not itself sustainable, let alone 420 million or a billion. Sustainability looks at the long term: will our resources allow

the shoulders of some awesome geometric curves. The 2000 census revealed how rapidly immigration is causing our population to skyrocket. The equivalent of another California has been added to the nation—32 million people since 1990. Demographers calculate that immigration is now the determining factor in causing America's rapid population growth—immigrants and their U.S. born children accounted for more than two-thirds of population growth in the last decade, and will continue to account for approximately two-thirds of our future growth. Clearly, America's population "growth issue" is an immigration issue.

The environmental problems just around the corner will require new, bold, creative leadership. There was a zoo in the 1960s, which put up a sign in part of the exit complex, which said "See The World's Most Dangerous Animal", and you went around the corner and there was a full-length mirror. Humans are the world's most dangerous animals. Similarly, I am haunted by a casual remark that the great biologist E.O. Wilson made recently. Wilson observed that the human species is the only species that, were it to disappear, every other species would benefit.<sup>9</sup> I suspect this is true. The human species has itself become the chief change agent of the environment. We face an environmental world where all past is prologue.



**Dr. Edward O. Wilson**

## II. The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform (the Jordan Commission)

I would recommend to you the findings of the Jordan Commission, headed by the liberal icon, the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. Appointed in 1990, the Commission issued a series of reports and recommendations which urged Congress to return U.S. immigration policy to the historic goals of reuniting nuclear families, providing employers with skilled workers and providing humanitarian

aid to refugees. The Commission and Barbara Jordan specifically recommended cutting legal immigration to 550,000 immigrants chosen more for the skills they could bring to America. Important to this symposium, the Commission came out strongly against illegal immigration.<sup>10</sup>

“The credibility of immigration policy can be measured by a simple yardstick: people who should get in do get in; people who should not get in are kept out; and people who are judged deportable are required to leave.”

The Commission recommended additional barriers to employment of illegal immigrants, including a computerized registry to verify work eligibility and utilizing the already-existing penalties against employer who knowingly hire illegal aliens. Its stated intention was to eliminate the “pull factor” that attracted desperate illegal immigrants to unscrupulous employers.

### III. Illegal Immigration

America would have been wise to adopt the recommendations of the Jordan Commission. I have already given you my reasons for supporting the Commissions recommendations on legal immigrants: I believe we must build a sustainable society and stabilize our population. Now let us turn to the question of illegal immigration.

The foundation of any immigration policy is that immigrants should come through a process that is procedurally and substantially fair. It almost seems naïve to start out the argument that we are a nation of laws, and that people should come here legally. This is not a mere formality as some imply, or a tiresome technicality: remember that there are millions of people patiently waiting to come to America, and illegal immigrants skip the line. To continue to tolerate this practice is not only a legal issue; it is morally unfair to those waiting to come legally. The argument should stop there, but it doesn't,

so let's look at some of the public policy reasons against the institution of illegal immigration.

### *Economic Impact of Illegal Immigration*

Illegal immigration is having a heavy economic, social and demographic impact and it is past time to make a bipartisan case for controlling illegal immigration. I first got interested in illegal immigration when a Colorado packing plant fired a group of Hispanic Americans and replaced them with illegal immigrants. A small group of the fired workers came to me, as Governor, to complain. There was little I could do. I called the President of the packing plant who nicely told me to mind my own business and claimed that all his new workers had Green cards, which indeed they had, bought in the underground market along with fake

Social Security cards for \$25 apiece. Some time later, INS raided the plant but the workforce evaporated during the raid, to return (or to be replaced by other illegal immigrants) shortly thereafter. The plant continued to employ a largely monolingual Spanish-speaking workforce until it was bought out and closed 10 years later.

It is easy to see why this underground workforce is attractive to employers. The owner of this particular packing plant essentially told me he was not going to pay his (legal) workers \$16 a hour, plus benefits, when he could hire illegals at \$10 a hour without benefits. This type of reasoning will forever lock the bottom quartile of our American earners into poverty: for how are they ever to obtain a decent wage when employers have access to endless pools of illegal unskilled labor? Illegal immigrants are generally good hard working people who will quietly accept minimum wage (or below), don't get or expect health care or other benefits, and if they complain they can be easily fired. Even the minimum U.S. wage is attractive to workers from countries whose standard of living is a fraction of ours.



**A cartoon image of the late Barbara Jordan exaggerates her “get tough” position on immigration.**

But that is not to say it is “cheap labor”. It may be “cheap” to those who pay the wages, but for the rest of us it is clearly “subsidized” labor, as we taxpayers pick up the costs of education, health, and other municipal costs imposed by this workforce. These have become a substantial and growing cost as the nature of illegal immigration patterns has evolved.

For decades illegal immigrants were single men who would come up from Mexico or Central America, alone, pick crops or perform other low paid physical labor and then go home. They were indeed “cheap labor”. But starting slowly in the 1960s, and steadily increasing to this day, these workers either bring their families or smuggle them into the country later. They become a permanent or semi-permanent population living in the shadows but imposing immense municipal costs. Illegal immigration today isn’t “cheap” labor except to the employer. It is labor subsidized by the U.S. taxpayer; where a few employers get the benefit and the rest of us pay. These costs ought to be obvious to all, but the myth of “cheap labor” and “jobs Americans won’t do” persists. But let us examine it in more detail using our experience in Colorado.

It is hard to get an exact profile of the people who live in the underground economy, but studies do show the average illegal immigrant family is larger than the average American family. It costs Colorado taxpayers over \$10,000 a child just to educate a child in our public schools (closer to \$12,000 per child per-year for non-English-speakers). Realistically no minimum wage workers, or even low waged workers pay anywhere near enough taxes to pay for even *one* child in school. Even if illegal immigrants were paying all Federal and State taxes, Colorado’s estimated 32.3 thousand illegal alien children in Colorado school systems (out of an estimated Colorado population of 230,000 illegal immigrants) impose gargantuan

costs on our taxpayers. This figure is actually a significant under-statement because there are an estimated 30,000-40,000 additional children born to illegal immigrants while they are in the U.S. (and these children are considered U.S. citizens), clearly adding to the total impact of illegal immigration.

We have here in Colorado, and increasingly nationwide, single family houses with three or more families of illegal immigrants earning, at the most,

between \$15,000 and \$25,000 per family, but with multiple kids in the school system costing our taxpayers more in education costs *alone* that all three families *gross* in wages. Studies show that approximately two-thirds of illegal immigrants lack a high school diploma. The National Academy of Sciences has found that there is a significant fiscal drain on U.S. taxpayers for each adult immigrant (legal or illegal) without a high school education.<sup>11</sup>

But don’t get caught up in the battle of studies: just use your common sense and thoughtfully consider whether a low income

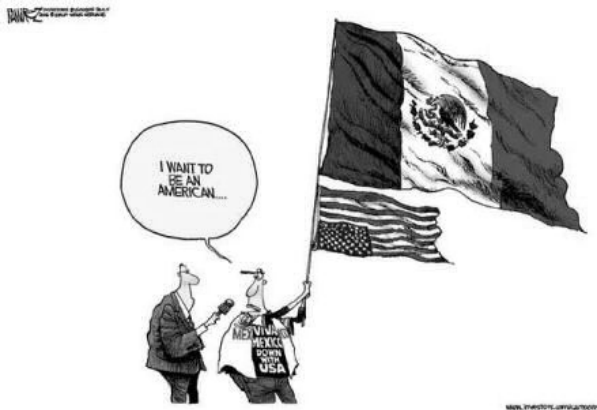
family with three or four kids in the school system are paying anything *close* to what it costs to educate their kids. These are expensive families to provide with governmental services. Some employers are getting cheap labor and externalizing the costs of that labor to the rest of us.

Americans pay in more ways than taxes. Cheap labor drives down wages as low-income Americans are forced to compete against these admittedly hard working people. Even employers, who don’t want to wink at false documents, are forced to lower wages just to be competitive. It is, in many ways, a “race to the bottom” fueled by poor people often recruited from evermore-distant countries by middlemen who profit handsomely. It isn’t only wages, the employers of this abused form of labor often violate minimum wage requirements, Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards, and overtime laws. Further, if injured, illegal workers often have



no access to Workmen’s Compensation.

The Americans who pay the price are those at the bottom of the economic ladder who directly compete with this illegal workforce. The very people that liberals profess to speak for and care about pay the price in lost and suppressed wages while employers get the benefits of reduced wages. Professor George Borjas of Harvard, an immigrant himself, estimates that American workers lose \$190 billion annually in depressed wages caused by the constant flooding of the labor market from newcomers.



The dilemma is compounded by the fact that approximately 40 percent of illegal workers are paid in cash, off books. Go to any construction site, almost anywhere in America, and you will find illegal workers who are paid cash wages with no taxes withheld. Equally important, those illegal workers whose employers do pay withholding taxes have learned to claim 12 or more dependents, so their withholding taxes are either non-existent or minimal. Virtually every city in America has an area where illegal immigrant workers gather and people come by to get “cheap” cash wage labor. High costs, low taxes, downward pressure on wages, this is not cheap labor; this is the most expensive labor a community could ever imagine.

**Supply Side Poverty**

Consequently, we have a group of workers who pay no, or reduced withholding taxes, with above average birthrate (thus above average impact on schools), impacting our school system, with more, and more arriving every year. It is Orwellian to call

this “cheap labor.” It is “supply side” poverty added to our society so a few employers can get “cheap labor.” It is happening nationwide. Mortimer B. Zuckerman, Editor in Chief of U.S. News and World Report, speaking of U.S. poverty asks:

“So why haven’t overall poverty rates declined further? In a word—immigration. Many of those who come to the United States are not only poor but also unskilled. Hispanics account for much of the increase in poverty—no surprise, since 25 percent of poor people are Hispanic. Since 1989, Hispanics represent nearly three quarters of all increase in overall poverty population. Immigration has also helped keep the median income for the country basically flat for five straight years, the longest stretch of income stagnation on record.”<sup>12</sup> (10/3/05)

**Health Care Impact**

The health care cost of this illegal workforce is also significant and also subsidized by U.S. taxpayers. You can go to virtually any emergency room in Colorado and you will hear Spanish as the predominant language. “Colorado has one of the highest rates of new mothers who speak little or no English”.<sup>13</sup> Over eighty percent of the births in Denver Health and Hospitals are to monolingual Spanish speaking women. Increasingly we are seeing elderly grandparents with health problems present in emergency rooms as extended families consolidate. No, we don’t know for sure that they are illegal, because it is against Federal law to check, but it is safe to assume that most are. Denver Health alone estimates that they spend



one million taxpayer dollars *just in interpreting* for non-English speakers. What would the total taxpayer cost of interpreting be statewide, and that is just a fraction of the total health care costs? The cumulative cost of this “subsidized” labor is impossible

to ascertain and difficult to even estimate, but it is immense and growing as our population of these workers grows. A few benefit, the rest of us pay.

It is technically illegal for illegal immigrants to claim Medicaid, but as Health and Human Services Inspector General found, "Forty-seven states allow self-declaration of U.S. citizenship for Medicaid" and over half of those do not verify the accuracy of these claims as part of their post-eligibility quality control activities."<sup>14</sup> The barn doors are wide open! Families without a word of English boldly declare themselves U.S. citizens and nobody checks! When states don't use the tools available to them, it is more the states' fault than those abusing the system.

Many of my liberal friends like to think of themselves as "citizens of the world" who dislike borders, and indeed we all realize we live in a more interdependent, interconnected world. But "to govern is to choose" and if everyone is my brother and sister than nobody will ever get covered by Social programs liberals compassionately seek. I have been fighting all my life for universal health care, but we can't have "the best health care system in the world" combined with Swiss cheese borders. Social and redistributive programs require borders. It is fine to think of yourself as a citizen of the world, or a loving Christian, but we solve most problems in a national context and therefore we owe a greater



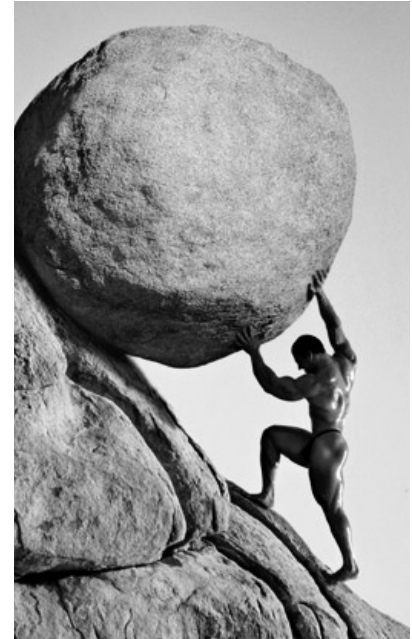
Jacob Bronowski

moral duty to our fellow Americans than we do to non-citizens. Americans must defend borders or they will lose all the social programs that they care about! No social program can survive without geographic limits and defined beneficiaries.

We often hear that 45 million Americans are without health insurance, but this figure is likely overestimated, because it includes over 10 million illegal immigrants. Most of the estimated 12 to 15 million people living illegally in America do not have health insurance. More and more hospi-

tals are going broke because of the constant stream of uninsured, particularly in our border states. The Census Bureau estimates that 11.6 million people in immigrant households are without health insurance.

<sup>15</sup>Not all immigrants are illegal; nevertheless, our experience here in Colorado indicates a substantial majority is not legally in the country. The problem is much like when the gods condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain,



and the stone would fall back of its own weight. It is not unlike when you expand education funding or Medicaid and give extra state aid to impacted hospitals, but the problems grow faster than the solution. We use the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) to cover uninsured children, but a new flood of immigrant children without health insurance quickly overcomes our gains. The Center for Immigration Studies has estimated that for a recent five-year period, immigrants and their children accounted for 59 percent (2.7 million people) of the growth of the uninsured.

Ironically, the price of compassion is restriction. The only way we can help America's poor is to develop programs which are not constantly diluted by the rest of the world's 6 billion, no matter how sympathetic.

## Conclusion

"In every age," writes Bronowski (1973), in *The Ascent of Man*, "there is a turning point, a new way of seeing and asserting the coherence of the world."<sup>16</sup> We metaphorically must give birth to a whole new world. Our new environmental issues, like global warming, will not just take a legislative

victory or public awareness campaign, it will take a revolution in the way we see and make sense of our basic civilization and the human role in the universe.

I believe that we are surrounded with evidence that increasingly shows that something is fundamentally wrong with our historic ways of looking at the world. Yesterday's solutions have become today's problems, and these problems are of a different scale and coming at us with increasing velocity. The growth paradigm that allowed us to create wealth, reduce poverty, and increase living standards is becoming obsolete. Those human traits which allowed us to prevail over the ice, the tiger and the bear—in a time of an empty earth continue to operate long after we are no longer an empty earth.

Reg Morrison in his book, *The Spirit of the Gene*, suggests that those genes that saved a species now are on course to destroy us. He suggests that we are hard-wired by survival traits to grow and over-consume and that now, unless controlled, these traits will drive us into oblivion. Evolution moves too slowly to correct the dilemma that evolution put us in by its past slow progress.<sup>17</sup>

Ecologically we are sailing on uncharted waters while moving at unprecedented speed. We have lost our anchor and our navigational instruments are out of date.

When I entered high school in 1950, there were 2.6 billion people on earth, and there were 50 million cars. Now there are over 6 billion people on earth, and our car population has increased ten-fold to 500 million; and within 25 years it is projected there will be 1 billion cars on the world's roads. (Youngquist)



Nothing in our past prepares us for the environmental problems that we are faced with. We cannot grow our way out of these problems; we cannot use history to put them into perspective. The lessons we have learned living on an empty earth teach us the wrong lessons. We are still trying to “be fruitful, multiply, and subdue” an earth that now needs saving. Contemporary life is a rock rolling downhill, gathering speed. It presents us with a series of problems of nature, for which the lessons of history are *not only* useless, but teach us the wrong lessons.

The famous Economist Kenneth Boulding said that the modern human dilemma is that all our experience deals with the past, yet all our problems are challenges of the future. The lessons we have learned in the past do not help and in many ways are counter-productive in solving the problems of sustainability. Our economic models have become ecologically unsustainable.

Humans appear throughout history to be insatiable creatures. There appears at this time to be no reasonable limit on “more,” “bigger,” or “faster” or “richer.” If we haven't already hit carrying capacity, it is just a matter of time.

We cannot solve growth-related problems with more growth; we must move to sustainability. It took a billion years or more for nature to create the limited stocks of petroleum and mineral wealth which modern technology and human ingenuity have recently learned to exploit. But we are squandering our one time inheritance of cheap energy and handy resources. The models so painstakingly developed over 300 years to create more jobs and more goods and services must be dramatically modified.



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