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Immigration: The Shifting Paradigm

By Richard D. Lamm

Someone once showed me how public policy paradigms shifted. The first step is:

NO TALK NO DO

No one is talking about the issue. No one is doing anything about it. This gives way to:

TALK NO DO

as a few opinion molders began to articulate a different vision. This quickly becomes:

TALK DO

The issue is now in full flood. Now everyone is talking and debating the issue and change is commencing. Laws are being changed, mores evolving, organizations reflecting the new order are springing up. Lastly,

NO TALK DO

— the paradigm has shifted, the matter is no longer being hotly debated and the contentiousness has largely gone out of the issue. The new ethic or the new order has arrived and is widely accepted.

Changing a long-standing institution like immigration was bound to involve a long, bitter battle. Immigration has served this nation too well to be lightly cast aside. The burden of proof for less immigration ought to be placed on those questioning this long-standing institution. It is up to us to show that the conditions which made immigration an asset have changed, and to prove that we are saying something different from earlier immigration opponents.

With that said, we also know that public policy makers are slow to recognize changed conditions. Barbara Tuchman has observed:

Policy is formed by preconceptions and by long implanted biases. When information is relayed to policy makers, they respond in terms of what is already inside their heads and consequently make policy less to fit the facts than to fit the baggage that has accumulated since childhood.

Immigration is a good example. Our immigration policy does not fit our present needs or realities, but reflects more the "baggage" that accumulates around a policy that once made sense and around which has developed a powerful nostalgia.

But reality eventually trumps nostalgia. Polls today show an overwhelming percentage of Americans want less or no immigration. In many states, immigration is

the political issue — having gone from obscurity to dominance in a few short years. What happened?

We have just seen a paradigm being shifted. We lived through it. We helped make it happen. The battle is not over yet but we are in the "talk/do" stage and the issue will never again engender unquestioning acceptance. As John Tanton has observed: "The age of migration is coming to an end."

It is of more than a little interest to watch how this issue has exploded in the media. Ten years ago, even as a sitting governor, I found it was difficult to place so much as an op-ed piece questioning immigration. There is a liberal orthodoxy in the press that makes an issue like immigration especially hard to question. Garrett Hardin would write a piece or Roger Conner would shame some newspaper into a story covering the issue, but it was largely outside the national dialogue.

Paradigm shifts seldom have a single author. Darwin and Galileo notwithstanding, large orthodoxies usually change because gradually many individuals here and there recognize that these orthodoxies have outlived their usefulness. A few especially perceptive people rethink the issue and place their thoughts before the public. Critics from the old order savage these pioneers. Huxley once observed that "all great truths begin as heresy." But the heresy is examined by thoughtful people and picks up supporters. Soon, a national debate ensues.

For instance, Richard Estrada, who helped popularize this issue and who has drawn more than his share of criticism: in a series of elegantly written op-ed pieces, Estrada took on the immigration orthodoxy and single-handedly made many people rethink the issue. He moved from signed op-ed pieces to unsigned editorials as he was elevated to the editorial pages of the *Dallas Morning News*. The preciseness of his writing and the power of his logic changed a lot of minds and trimmed many a sail.

Issues begin as a whisper and quickly turn into a shout. Suddenly, seeds planted bloom everywhere. Note Jack Miles' wonderful article, "Blacks versus Browns," in the October 1992 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. With obvious feeling and intensity, Jack Miles came to the painful conclusion that it did not make sense to add a second underclass until we had dealt successfully with the black underclass. Almost fighting himself every step of the way, this honest reporter wrote of the immigration issue as he had lived it — as he had observed it take place in his Los

Angeles:

If there were no Latinos — and no other immigrants — around to do all the work that is to be done in Los Angeles, would blacks not be hired to do it? I think they would be. Wages might have to be raised. Friction might be acute for a while. But, in the end, the work would go looking for available workers.

Citing Vernon Briggs and other scholars, Miles uses his own experiences living in Los Angeles to show how legal and illegal immigrants displace black workers; how they put a drag on the wages of all workers and contribute to the type of tensions that produced the Los Angeles riots. Miles recognized that it was not enough to have a large heart; one had to recognize that choices had consequences. The immigration of Latinos had significant consequences to Black America.

By an irony that I find particularly cruel, Latino immigration may be doing to American Blacks at the end of the twentieth century what European immigrants did to them at the end of the nineteenth.

We must also give credit to Peter Brimelow and his article, "Time to Rethink Immigration," in the June 22, 1992, issue of the *National Review*. An immigrant himself, Brimelow, like Miles, simply stops and asks, "What will it do to our cohesiveness as a nation?"

Brimelow looks at the jobs issue and questions why we are taking largely unskilled immigrants in a world economy where national success depends on the skills and talents of its workers. Citing George J. Borjas (another immigrant), Brimelow points out that our immigrant stream is increasingly made up of unskilled workers who compete with our own unskilled for jobs and lower the wages of the jobs available to our own poor. He further points out that less than 4 percent of the legal immigrants were "admitted on the basis of skills."

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Additionally, Brimelow shows that wages of native high school dropouts fell by 10 percent in the 1980s relative to the wages of more educated workers, and experts calculate about a third of that decline is attributable to immigration.

This sub-issue will grow in significance in the immigration debate. I am convinced American public policy is not getting an objective look at this issue. We are constantly told by the orthodoxy that immigrants "pay their way" and do not substantially take jobs from U.S. workers. Massive policy contortions are employed in an attempt to make sense of a policy that adds millions of low-skilled immigrants to a nation with substantial numbers of unemployed and underemployed of its own.

I would suggest that we need more recognition of the obvious and less investigation of the obscure. I am not impressed with scholars-with-a-viewpoint, often funded by the Ford Foundation, who study limited geographic areas and pronounce no (or little) displacement.

Let's look at the U.S. job market with open eyes. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that we will create 18 million new jobs during the 1990s. During the 1990s, 35 million Americans will turn 18 and 79 percent of these will go out on the labor market. That means about 28 million new entrants to the labor market.

Now, approximately 1 million people a year retire and though some of these retire because their jobs have been eliminated, let's assume 10 million jobs will open up because of retirement.

This still leaves 28 million new labor entrants and 28 million new job openings, without immigration and without considering our own unemployed and underemployed. Does it make sense with 8 million unemployed, and perhaps another 8 million discouraged workers who do not appear on the unemployment statistics, to bring in 10 to 13 million immigrants? The numbers do not make sense on their face. The jobs are not created in the same way they were when we had an empty continent filled with free land. We live in a cash/wage economy where an average job required over \$70,000 in capital to create. The jobs we need are those which require skills to fill and capital to create. It is reckless public policy to bring in massive numbers of unskilled immigrants without any idea of how these people will add to the economy or the competitiveness of America.

However powerful the economic arguments, the paradigm has probably shifted more for sociological reasons. Jobs are hard to trace through a \$6 trillion economy, but "Sixty Minutes" can show the bombing of the World Trade Center by immigrants or the welfare fraud committed by illegal immigrants and change more minds on one Sunday night than most of us can change in a year. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), generally, and Dan Stein and Ira Mehlman in particular, have furnished the research and background to show the abuse of asylum and welfare by immigrants. These are hot-point political issues which have contributed considerably to awakening the public to some downsides of

immigration.

Stories beget stories. "Sixty Minutes" helps make a subject respectable and then *Reader's Digest* feels safe in printing "Welfare for Illegal Aliens?" (*Reader's Digest*, June 1994). *Reader's Digest* has ten times the circulation of *The Atlantic Monthly* and is read by people who write their Congress people and call their talk show hosts.

While these issues consolidate and expand, Roy Beck, again in *The Atlantic Monthly*, raises another sensitive issue: assimilation. America has almost a blind faith in the "melting pot," but the process might be breaking down under the strain of numbers. "The Ordeal of Immigration in Wausau" (*The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1994) shows how well-meaning religious people, encouraging settlement of refugees, can create significant unintended consequences. Increasingly, Americans are questioning whether the "melting pot" model is working, while many are arguing that it is not even appropriate. "Sixty Minutes" broadcast a TV version the Wausau story in October.

No less a person than Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (W.W. Norton, 1992) weighs in on this subject adding a powerful liberal voice to the argument.

All of these articles stand on their own merits, but also form part of massive change of the mind of the public. They reflect a wonderful case model of how accepted orthodoxies are challenged and changed. They show that a few people who care can affect change by the power of their ideas.

I heard a speaker once observe that there were "river issues" and "boat issues." The boat issues were the matters of the day — temporary issues that are written up in newspapers. River issues are the large movements of a society. These are the issues not of newspapers as much as of history books. They are the significant societal issues that truly affect change. Boat issues float back and forth on river issues, but the river issues ultimately control.

It is my passionate belief that when the history of these times is written, the issues of population, the environment and immigration will be shown to be "river issues" — and the public will come to appreciate their significance by a process roughly described as:

NO TALK - NO DO

TALK - NO DO

TALK - DO

NO TALK - DO. ■