

Huey Johnson was Secretary of Resources for former Governor of California, Jerry Brown. He founded the Trust for Public Land and once headed the California chapter of the Nature Conservancy. He is now a columnist for the San Francisco Examiner where this column appeared on February 23, 1993. Reprinted by permission.

Immigration Era Is (Probably) Over

By Huey D. Johnson

Governor Wilson is standing tall, leading the state and nation on the nastiest of political issues, immigration.

California is particularly crunched by the recession-driven shortage of tax dollars. So when Wilson thinks about immigration, he thinks first of the enormous financial costs.

Since it is the federal government that enacts and administers immigration laws, Wilson went to Washington, D.C., to seek \$1.5 billion to help pay our increasingly steep tab for all those new people. While our budget deficit and population grow larger, he is still waiting for an answer.

Half the number of immigrants entering the United States each year head for California. Since 1980, California has grown by 6 million people; 37 percent of those are foreign immigrants. There are 1.3 million undocumented adults living here.

In Los Angeles County public schools alone, 250,000 kids of undocumented parents stretch the capabilities of our education system. I'm talking about decline by exceeding limits. And the crash in the quality of education in California is but one part.

Politicians have ignored the stress from population increases. They have simply stretched limited money further and further, which thins out everyone's quality of life.

Not facing up to the environmental limits to our air and water quality and soils adds to the difficulty.

There is a larger problem.

In his new book, *Around the Cragged Hill*, George Kennan, a respected genius and former diplomat now in the winter of his years mulls things over at Princeton.

He observes that migration and population growth from migration are a danger to nations.

"Just as water seeks its own level, so relative prosperity, anywhere in the world, tends to suck in poverty from adjacent regions to the lowest levels of employment. And in taking in the migrants often changes its whole makeup," he writes.

The stress on current residents, particularly those struggling daily, is great. Many react with anger. In booming economic times, there is seemingly room for everyone. But in times of economic downturn, it is hard to accommodate new people who will work for a lot less.

I remember meeting with Hispanic political

leaders on the subject of immigrants from Mexico in the early '80s. They surprised me by saying that the legal Hispanic residents were trying to buy homes and become part of America. But they are being displaced in the job market by the migrants.

"It is devastating," one of them said, "and we don't know what to do about it."

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The issue is at its nastiest politically when our federal policy, which is described as open-door, fumbles badly on fairness. It reflects a prejudice when we welcome some nationalities like the Irish and Cubans, but send Haitians back home.

The sad truth is that although each of us here now has benefitted from the open-door policy at one time or another, the historical era of immigration is over. There is literally no place in the world where mass migrations of humans can be accommodated.

As there has been a huge crushing wave of migration into the United States and California, there has also been a large one in Europe.

The drought in Africa caused a huge exodus of people in African and Middle Eastern countries to Europe. And the migration from Eastern Europe to the West has intensified the conflict in countries like Germany and England.

I talked to a teacher in The Netherlands this month who suddenly has 35 nationalities in the grade school where he teaches. New immigrants make up 80 percent of the children in the school. The Netherlands, like California, has liberal benefits for newcomers. With the relaxing of the borders between nations for trade reasons, a huge, unexpected deluge of people arrived in the already overcrowded nation.

One can predict the same migration into California and Texas and Arizona if the North American Free Trade Agreement is ratified.

To his credit, Wilson has honestly approached that hot potato, too. He has asked neighboring Mexico to help limit its emigrants to those who have legally

applied.

The practice of nations to ignore their carrying capacity has become increasingly disastrous. Wilson deserves support and congratulations for facing up to the many problems, starting with migration.

He may be the first to bring a factual base to the population dilemma by talking about the real costs.■