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THE WIND HAS SHIFTED

A NEW AGENDA FOR IMMIGRATION REFORMERS

By Otis L. Graham, Jr.

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA —

What a remarkable period this has been in the public discussion of the cluster of issues which is now brought together by *The Social Contract* — immigration, population, culture, nationality, language, national cohesion, rights vs. responsibilities, and much else! The backdrop has been the dramatically unfolding story, commencing in 1989, of the collapse of the communist regime and perhaps the dissolution of the USSR itself, yet these events have been paralleled by far-reaching changes within the United States in both elite and popular discussion of, and, apparently, attitudes toward, the cluster of issues in which many of us are interested. The national internal debate has markedly changed and continues to change, and the climate that produced the disastrous immigration law of 1990 is no more.

When the immigration law of 1990 passed and was signed in November by the President, part of the explanation for this act of public policy that was so out of step with popular opinion was the intellectual climate among American elites. The restrictionist side(s) of the argument was stigmatized, stereotyped and stifled. A great taboo-blanket kept unfashionable facts and perspectives from being expressed or given a fair hearing. "There has been a conspiracy of silence among liberals and conservatives on the subject of immigration," wrote Peter Skerry in *The New Republic* in June, 1991, which was half the truth — the other half was a stifling of the debate by motive-assassination and a blanket of superficial myths.

Those of us who treat contemporary immigra-tion as a problem have long been acutely aware of this climate and could find no way to alter it significantly, though we were surely making some difference. It was hard to make immigration a topic, a subject for discussion. Myths were frequently evoked (the usual Statue of Liberty incantations about the national identity being tied up in welcoming the world's poor, homeless, etc.), and those persons attempting to address immigration's problematic aspects were not only smothered in these myths but fenced in by taboos. "One must not raise concerns about immigration," they intoned. Those who did, the taboos asserted, were acting out of base, racist motives. Where discussion of the growing immigration problem broke through the taboos, restrictionist arguments and views were misrepre-sented, underrepresented and distorted. The expansionist side tended to have the "moral high ground" and to get away with shabby, outdated arguments. The situation seemed to be getting worse as the 1980s became the 1990s. Added to the myths of immigration's supposedly benign economic impact came a set of cultural arguments: America needed more "diversity," a term never defined or analyzed. "Diversity" was a Good with no critics. "Multicul-turalism" was a kindred idea, asserted by partisans, but there was no critical examination.

A CHINK IN THE ARMOR

Then, in 1990, there began a tidal shift.

The label "Politically Correct" (PC) was somehow born and at once we centrists had a handle on the albatross around our necks. Actually, the term "Politically Correct" (or Political Correctness) has a history (not yet mapped, to my knowledge), and is defined in the new *Webster's College Dictionary* as "marked by or adhering to a typically progressive orthodoxy on issues involving race, gender, sexual affinity, or ecology." The term's obscure history is contained within the history of the far Left. But in 1990 the concept of PC became national terminology for a widening set of taboos, and articles on PC clarified how and where the intellectual climate has been policed in the interest of, at once, the "growth lobby" on immigration (to use Katharine Betts' term) and those assaulting the "Eurocentric" core of American culture. In "The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct," (*The New York Times*, October 29, 1990), Richard Bernstein reported on the pressure to conform to a "progressive" ideology on American university campuses. The cat was out of the bag! PC was the "intimidate-the-opponents" and "control-the-agenda" side of a two-pronged strategy to change the country radically. The other prong of the strategy was the social reconstructionist program running under the misleading term "Multiculturalism."

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With the journalistic discovery of PC, the tide turned. The language taboos of the multicultural left, which for so long had channeled and limited the argument, not only about immigration but about broader social changes, were exposed to ridicule and attack as "liberal McCarthyism," on campus and in the media. Major journals took up this theme (*Time, Newsweek, The New Republic, The New York Times*), and President Bush devoted a speech at the University of Michigan to the dangers of PC. Campus codes of "correct" and "incorrect" speech were given publicity — most notably the Smith College code that required one not to say "fat" but "gravity-impaired" and not "disabled" but rather "differently abled," condemned all the familiar "isms" while inventing some new crimes ("lookism:" the bigoted view that appearance matters), and in general decreed that value judgments about values were out of bounds. Campus climate dictated that all cultures and cultural values were of equal worth, and all were positive — except, of course, the operative norms of Western Civilization which had a shameful past and, hopefully, no future.

No one could say how much truth there was in the portraits of the American university scene by authors such as Dinesh D'Souza, whose *Illiberal Education* is a powerful polemic. And critics of PC were sometimes uncomfortable in the company of D'Souza (once a conservative Dartmouth student) and former Secretary of Education William Bennett, who had given Stanford's curricular reforms much unwanted (to the campus) publicity. But it was notable that many well-known members of the campus liberal and left communities agreed that there was extensive censorship, official and self-adopted, on America's campuses. Yale's C.Vann Woodward saw some merit in D'Souza's book, Eugene Genovese declared war on the campus McCarthyites from the left, and Stephen Thernstrom at Harvard told the story of his harassment by the PC police while teaching history — judging the climate to be worse than that of the 1950s.

The chief significance of the uproar over PC was to expose a nasty mood of intimidation both on and off campuses, and to underline how the words "racist" and "racism" had been so abused as to be worthless and, therefore, no longer quite so intimidating. The immigration reform movement, quite familiar with such epithets, might now have to be rebutted with more believable language. Another result was to call attention to the pervasive drive for what was called "Multiculturalism," but which, upon inspection, turned out to be not an accepted and benign continuous welcoming of many cultures into the American mix, but a virulent dislike of all things "Eurocentric" and, in its most aggressive form, a repudiation of the American heritage as to language, history, and culture. Writers found aggressive "Multiculturalism" of this sort at work in the worlds of art and music as well as literature. Liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. wrote a brilliant critique of the efforts to impose a new sort of history in the schools (*The Disuniting of America*, 1991). *Time* and other magazines carried reports that the upcoming 1992 "celebration" of the "discovery" of America by Columbus was not going to be that sort of event this time, but a contentious occasion in which angry spokespersons for the invaded Native Americans and their natural environment would deplore the very establishment of European settlements in the New World. Europe had come to America 500 years ago and, on the eve of that quincentennial, it seemed that everywhere in America things European were in retreat.

Thus, in 1990-91, it looked as though the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Albania were not the only multi-ethnic nations flying apart due to forces from within. Perhaps they were only the most advanced in the process of dissolution. Canada, for example, could be seen as only somewhat further back in the process. The headlines in 1990, and especially in 1991, were about `the disintegrating nations' of the old Soviet bloc, but American "op-ed," editorial, and news columns increasingly carried a broad story of the loss of social cohesion at home. (And this essay is written just after the nation witnessed, in the confirmation hearings of Judge Clarence Thomas, the most divisive episode in relations between the sexes that comes to memory.)

THE IMMIGRATION CONNECTION

Many writers began to see the connection of immigration to all of this where they had not admitted to seeing it before. Riots in Washington, DC in the early summer of 1991 between Salva-dorans and blacks had an obvious root in immigration that no one attempted to deny. Since blacks could not comfortably be called "racist," their objections to the growing population of Central Americans underlined immigration's inequitable costs. The "Third-Worldization of the United States" (a term which one would hope the media could find useful) was reported, in pieces, around the country. Cholera was recounted to be moving northward within Latin America and, by the end of summer 1991, was anticipated in shantytowns near San Diego and detected in Louisiana oyster beds. The news in California was a steady drumbeat of Third World symptoms — gang violence, social and class polarization, extensive underground economies. A New York writer, David Rieff, authored *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* in August 1991, and devoted considerable attention to immigration. Governor Pete Wilson, who as Senator had never seen a Mexican farmworker that he did not

want to welcome into California's fields, said, upon looking at the state's burgeoning deficits and social service spending, that there was a limit to the amount of immigration the state could absorb. The economic "recovery" claimed as a reality by the Bush administration in 1991 was too weak to be distinguished from recession, setting an economic climate of anxiety over job loss. George Hobbs, gruff mayor of Santa Maria, who declared that his city had "a Mexican problem," was condemned as "a racist" by spokespersons for the "Mexican community," but won re-election in June by a 62 percent majority.

And just as October 1991 arrived, Leon Bouvier's *Fifty Million Californians?* was published by the Center for Immigration Studies, carrying the most disconcerting news of all about the demographic prospects facing that state — the foremost haven for immigrants. California's population was growing explosively, he asserted, and the state's sharply differentiated fertility rates would inexorably transform the state into a very different mix of peoples. Bouvier thrust into public conscious-ness the incendiary news of birth rates: California's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) had vaulted upward from 1.9 to 2.3 in just six years (1982-88), with immigration of high fertility people the obvious lever. The Anglo TFR was at 1.7 in 1988 alongside the Asian at 2.5 and the Hispanic at 3.5 — figures depicting a social revolution in progress that apparently no one was permitted to discuss.

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Also in October 1991 there arrived in Washington a group of European representatives to take part in a conference, sponsored by the Center for Immigration Studies, centered on the political dilemmas of the newly emerging European Community in the face of rising tides of immigration from Africa, the Near East, and the former Soviet bloc. The media, in 1991, have been brimming with stories of the enormous refugee flows, and the potential of even larger flows, produced by the breakup of the USSR and other regimes in the communist bloc — stories such as "Five Million Want to Leave, Soviet Official Says" (*Washington Post*, January 26, 1991), and a "Special Edition" of the *Los Angeles Times* on October 1, 1991 which addressed the surge of human movement to be expected in the 1990s. European politics was quickly transformed as in France, Germany, Italy and elsewhere anti-immigrant sentiment and high social welfare costs forced officials and political parties to scramble for tougher positions. These stories powerfully conveyed to Americans a truth that their editorialists and intellectuals generally had denied: that immigration was a very large problem (see the cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*, Judith Miller, "Strangers at the Gates," September 15, 1991).

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These turbulent changes in the world map, in domestic discourse and in outlook did not alter America's immigration law nor the numbers coming over the border. But it is clear that the concern over increasing tribalism within American society is high and rising. The demographic impacts of immigration are advancing to the fore, and carry social implications that cause a deep uneasiness which, as yet, has little voice beyond Bouvier's. The immigration reform movement does not yet have adequate language, nor enough spokespersons, to talk about these demographic impacts — lacks language and credible spokespersons for distinguishing between Bad and Good Multiculturalism so that the former may be resisted. Yet, little flags of courage are being raised here and there, and the topic of massive immigration seems to be breaking free of the confines within which the intellectual and media elites have held it. Expansionists Julian Simon and Ben Wattenberg still live and write, as does California's Joel Kotkin, a second-rate but energetic booster of the idea that ageing America desperately needs a constant infusion of Third World blood. But, on the other tack, we have George Borjas arguing that the quality of immigrants has fallen sharply, the Leftist Christopher Lasch writes now of limits and of the impossibility of taking in all the world's poor (*The True and Only Heaven*, 1991), liberal writer Robert Kuttner asks if the time has not come for a national ID card, liberal author Robert B. Reich makes a powerful case that a high-quality workforce is the key to the American economic future and directly questions whether immigration should be the source of either low- *or* high-skilled workers in the future (*The Work of Nations*, 1991), and Otis L. Graham, Jr. concludes that if one thinks hard about the actual, and also the ideal, goals of immigration the nation no longer needs much of it at all (*Rethinking the Purposes of Immigration Policy*, 1991).

IMPLICATIONS

I conclude from this review not simply that the

times they are a changin', as anyone can see, but that the general alarm about our national direction is rapidly rising, that the immigration connection is inexorably coming forward in public discussion, and that fear of being labelled "insensitive" or "racist" ought no longer deter those who do not like the numbers coming over the borders, the composition/selection process, or both. The intellectual elites, whose success in stifling Australia's discussion of immigration is lucidly described in Katharine Betts' fine book, *Ideology and Immigration*, are losing their tight grip on discussion in the US. [Please see Dr. Betts observations on her visits to America on pp. 74-77 in this issue.]

As the sports announcers say, the "momentum has shifted," or so it seems. The Expansionists (we still do not have the proper label for them) are on the defensive, and discourse-controlling mechanisms are exposed and under attack. But the positive case for restriction needs continued elaboration, and the debate over the proposed US-Mexico Free Trade Agreement has added a complicated issue that the immigration reform movement, like nearly every other group, finds difficult to absorb into its framework of ideas.

In a changed intellectual climate, where should we concentrate our efforts? Perhaps Kotkin has hold of a vulnerable point when he stirs fears that an ageing society faces a "labor shortage" and also an energy, brains and creativity shortage. We can answer this but so far have not — effectively. The breakup of the USSR has toned down Wattenberg's hymns about the "universal nation," but we need to follow up by pointing out the negative side of deliberately dismantling America's cultural core by bringing in new citizens faster than they can be assimilated. It is certainly time for a critical discussion of that innocent shibboleth, "Diversity." As the political establishment and intellectual/media elites begin to share the public's concerns about the direction of the nation's culture — its very cohesion — they necessarily are brought up against the immigration connection. Perhaps an outlandish idea is now almost thinkable: that there was some merit (if much demerit in some of the terminology and underlying rationales) in the long-dead debate leading up to the laws of 1921 and 1924 and the decision by the Congress of the US that immigration should not destabilize the ethnic composition of the nation. That debate would be a short one in Japan with a clear answer, and both Germany and France are now engaged in just such a discussion — they *regret* the necessity for it, while we do not yet *see* the necessity for it. But that seeing seems much closer as we move into 1992.

In the US, we need to continue to emphasize and educate about the demographic implications of ongoing trends. The demographic transformation of California makes it a tutor to the country. But for immigration policy to change there must be political events that centrists on immigration have never been able to create. Repeal of sanctions seems to be going nowhere, and both sides are, in fact, politically dead in the water. What is needed now is for restrictionist public sentiment to "take some expansionist scalps" in those elections in which candidates who explicitly raise the immigration issue can defeat those who ignore it or take the expansionist side. "Expansionist scalps in '92!" ought to be the rallying cry. The central news of 1990-1991 is not that public opinion has changed, for such evidence as we have seen suggests that the broad public remains as it has been: opposed to massive immigration, beginning to be fatigued over the growing numbers and the assertiveness of the homeless, fearful of joblessness and of urban pathologies. The real news of 1990-1991 is that elite opinion has actually, at long last, begun to shift — at least to the extent of opening the media to the bad news that we have been trying for so long to get people to face. And the leftist thought-police have overplayed their hand and lost their tight grip on the language shaping the agenda. When events open a door a bit wider, it seems time to explore the new vistas. ■

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