

# Conference: Ethics of Immigration

Reportage by Robert McConnell

On November 5, 1993 nearly one hundred concerned citizens, minority spokespersons, social and natural scientists, journalists and philosophers gathered in Los Angeles for a landmark conference on the "Ethics of Immigration." The conference was organized and sponsored by the Washington D.C.-based Carrying Capacity Network, with the Fossil Fuel Policy Action Institute as co-sponsor.

Philosopher John Lachs of Vanderbilt University eloquently described moral problems in immigration policy. In his words,

*With regard to immigration policy, those who maintain that we must respect everyone's right to free movement ... operate with abstract principles that fail to capture the complexity of the moral situation. One's own children cannot be told to get in line with all those needing to be fed; the fact that they are ours gives them priority and imposes overriding obligations on us ... [W]e cannot think clearly about ... ethical problems if we begin by asserting the moral irrelevance of nations ... [they] exist, and [provide] the defining context and the structuring elements of the moral problems that surround immigration.*

He suggested that the right to settle in a country is a privilege, not an entitlement, and declared that decisions on immigration are sound only if they express the nation's values and promote its interests.

*We can be unapologetic in taking our own interest seriously for ... two reasons. First, we must not confuse morality with saintliness. The moral injunction is to take due account of others, not to refuse to take ourselves into account ... Second, self-interest in such cases is not morally selfish ...*

However, he went on to describe such an immigration policy, based on national values and economic self-interest, as open to "serious moral objection," due in part to the feeling of "the heartbreak of a dream denied." The pain of people denied the opportunity for self-improvement causes discomfort for us, and makes us feel "embarrassed at our undeserved good fortune."

In the long run, Lachs concluded, moral dilemmas (but realistic imperatives) such as limiting immigration have no fully satisfactory solutions.

*Even with the best of intentions, we cannot revise the moral structure of the world. But we can be fair and forthright in our procedures, we can avoid ... discrimination and ... promote [community interests]. In a world in which more cannot be done, that should be enough.*

Some other highlights of the conference:

- In perhaps the most powerful presentation of the day, keynote speaker Richard Estrada of the *Dallas Morning News* (who is presently serving a six-year term on the Congressionally-mandated Immigration Reform Commission) maintained that "the American family needs time to heal itself." He focused on the impact of 1.5 million annual immigrants on America's Hispanic community, and reminded attenders that the United States is admitting more refugees than *the rest of the world combined*.

He further remarked that there are presently over 100 million people living in countries other than their birth country: can they all be accommodated in the United States should they desire to migrate here?

He countered the oft-stated opinion that "we can't stop illegal immigration, so why try" with the fact that deterrence works. At El Paso, illegal entries have dropped 95 percent since the Border Patrol switched from chasing illegals to interdiction. He described as a "false choice" the proposal to counter violence against undocumented migrants with completely open borders. To be effective, he declared, immigration control must be color-and ethnic/national-origin blind. Estrada proposed a plan to control the problem with the following elements: (1) stop illegal immigration, and (2) formulate a revised immigration policy in which the economic interests of the United States would be paramount.

Estrada proposed that we abandon the "family reunification" policy presently in force, which generates a false sense of "entitlement" on the part of potential migrants. Finally, he said, the *interests of potential newcomers must be weighed against the interests of present citizens*.

- Roy Beck, Washington editor of *The Social Contract*, described the agony of ethical choices: if we have enough life-saving drugs for 20,000 people but 100,000 need treatment, how do we decide whose life to save? He suggested that immigration presents a similar moral/ethical choice: since there are billions of impoverished people on the planet, should we admit

them all? If not, how do we decide which ones to "save?"

Beck went on to report the results of surveys of religious groups on the subject of immigration. Based on Gallup Polls, a majority of members of all religious groups surveyed indicated they want reduced immigration; however, Beck pointed out that the leaders of the groups are often powerful spokespersons for increased immigration. Adding to the irony, many such leaders are among those who at the same time support U.S. population stabilization.

- Professor Donald Huddle of Rice University released a research report on the economic impact of immigration, which indicated that the net cost far outweighed the financial contribution of immigrants to the American economy. Huddle reported the net cost of immigrants since 1970 to California in 1992 alone was \$18 billion, including \$4.2 billion paid in 1992 to 914,000 Californians displaced by immigrant workers. The report, discussed in a *Los Angeles Times* article published the same day, was immediately challenged by "immigrant-rights" advocacy groups.

- At an early morning panel of activists moderated by Carrying Capacity Network Executive Director Monique Miller, members of local community-action organizations presented their views, often passionately, on the impact of legal and illegal immigration on their communities. Ezola Foster of Black Americans for Family Values described the impact of illegal immigration on the black community of Watts, based on her 29 years of residence in central Los Angeles. Calling for a halt to illegal immigration and a five-year moratorium on legal immigration, she spoke of the "culture wars" in Los Angeles schools, the breakdown of security on the U.S.-Mexican border, and a culture of lawlessness fomented by wholesale disregard for immigration law. Gil Wong of American Citizens Together concurred in the decay of L.A. attributable to undocumented migrants, and decried the "anarchy" along the border, saying "we are a nation of laws."

Sal Juarez spoke for Citizens for Responsible Immigration, and described the problems that immigration was imposing upon Mexico's social fabric. He spoke of cities of "women only," the men having gone to "El Norte."

A local activist, Juarez spoke vividly of his own migration to California with his father, who was a well-trained professional fleeing persecution of Catholics by a Mexican strongman, more than forty years ago — indeed, becoming a field hand to support his family.

- Former Senator Gaylord Nelson, founder of Earth Day and one of the nation's most respected environmentalists, gave the luncheon address in which he called passionately for an environmental ethic and detailed the progress made since that first Earth Day

more than 20 years ago. Afterwards, I had the opportunity to ask the Senator whether we are continuing to make progress in enhancing public awareness of population and environmental issues. He agreed that the opposition is strong, but saw much cause for optimism, giving as an example the 1963 Surgeon General's report linking cigarette smoking with cancer and other diseases. It took 20 years to effect separate seating sections for nonsmokers, 25 years to ban smoking from airplanes. Moreover, today the airwaves are filled with environmental programs — in the 1960s there were none. "These things take time. We are making progress, especially with the young."

- Virginia Abernethy, editor of the journal *Population and Environment* and author of the newly released book *Population Politics*, suggested that, contrary to "conventional wisdom," economic development does not result in lower birth rates. She used data from several countries, notably Cuba, Algeria and India, where the perception of enhanced "quality of life" and the overthrow of colonialism actually resulted in higher birth rates. Her studies indicate rather that when people sense limits, the population tends to stabilize, illustrating that thesis with examples from Burma and from Sudan and other African countries during the 1980s. A corollary conclusion: the use of foreign aid to maintain consumption often leads to increased misery in recipient countries.

- David Pimentel of Cornell University documented the adverse impact of population growth on this country's ecosystem. We lose one million acres per year to urbanization and roads. We lose another 2.5 million acres to erosion. We dump one billion pounds of pesticides on our farmland and lawns each year. And we are rapidly depleting our precious groundwater: for example, 1 million gallons of water are required per acre to irrigate corn, and much of this grain is simply fed to livestock.

- The press's coverage of immigration and related issues was described by journalist George Bauer of *The Christian Science Monitor*, and by William Dickinson of the Biocentric Institute. Bauer related the growing national interest in these issues first to the Clinton administration's Haiti policy and the Zoe Baird hearings, then to the tragedy of violence against foreigners in Germany and the World Trade Center bombings. Studies linking the growing fiscal problem of California to the cost of immigrants helped focus national press attention on the issue.

Dickinson emphasized the critical link between immigration and population growth, itself a major factor in environmental degradation. And he decried as an example of a transcendently cynical national policy the offer by the Bush administration of asylum to any Chinese who claimed "fear of perse-cution" due

to the "coercive" policy of the Chinese government on population growth. (Would that have meant, Garrett Hardin wondered, that this country was offering to accept as refugees 1 billion Chinese?)

- Mark Nowak of Population/Environment Balance, and Rick Oberlink of Californians for Population Stabilization were featured in the closing session of the conference. Nowak echoed a dilemma that had been aired earlier. There are 2 billion impoverished people on the planet: how do we decide whom to accept? He agreed that it is imperative to consider immigration's growing role in U.S. population growth, and resultant environmental degradation. He advocated an immigration policy aimed at fairness, and in the best interest of both America and the migrant's home country.

Oberlink questioned what he described as an underlying assumption of U.S. population policy: that somehow this country has an obligation to accept immigrants, although no other country in the world takes this view. He and former INS Commissioner Alan Nelson deplored the use of such degrading terms as nativist, racist, xenophobic, immigrant-basher and the like, which are often applied to those who in good conscience question our present immigration policy. He pointed out that while we debate these issues, California's population is growing faster than India's, and mainly from immigration.

The Ethics of Immigration Conference provided a much-needed format for rational discussion of the thorny issue of immigration's impact. Additionally, the conference presented a refreshing and overarching concern for *community* — a call for a new and invigorated American community composed of all the strands which have formed the American tapestry over the past 400 years. And there was a plea for *time* — time for new arrivals to be incorporated into the American family ... time for this country to finally settle a debt with its African-American segment.

Social commentator and philosopher Os Guinness, in his new book *The American Hour*, calls for the collective formulation of a new public philosophy to reunite America. Such a public discourse is critically important but is extremely difficult to conduct if the composition of the American "focus group" is constantly changed by relentless immigration. Therefore the nation desperately needs *time*, in the form of an end to illegal immigration and a much-restricted legal immigration — time to forge a new civic philosophy and collective partnership, a new consensus on what it means to be America and an American. For if migration — both legal and illegal — were to continue at its present rate, the nation clearly would be unable to maintain the "American Dream" for all its citizens, potential and actual. ■