

# Spearheading Immigration Reform Among Progressives

*An Interview with Leah Durant of Progressives for Immigration Reform*

**T**he following interview with Leah Durant, Executive Director of Progressives for Immigration Reform (PFIR), was conducted by Social Contract contributor Peter Gemma. Durant explains why mass immigration is a major problem and provides a candid perspective on population growth and ecological sustainability from a traditional liberal point of view. Since the organization's founding last January, PFIR has received "an overwhelmingly positive response" from liberals. PFIR focuses on mass immigration's impact on the carrying capacity of the U.S. population, the nation's ecology and energy resources, and the working conditions of both immigrants and native-born workers.



**GEMMA:** Tell me a little about PFIR: your website says your group advocates protections for American workers, the environment, and "improving the lives of people worldwide." I'd like to know a little more about that last statement.

**DURANT:** That's a good question, Peter. Our policy statement on improving the lives of people worldwide is based on the goal

of stabilizing U.S. population. The fact is that nearly 70 percent of U.S. population growth is a direct result of immigration and the higher-than-replacement fertility rates of immigrants. Because in many instances people are coming to the U.S. to escape economic peril, PFIR's position on immigration is that the best way to reduce the numbers of people immigrating to the United States is to enable the world's immigrants to bloom where they are planted.

PFIR's policies take into account that the liberal position on reducing immigration should include support for educational and wealth-generating opportunities within the sending countries, which often are developing nations. It is our position that such opportunities are the optimal path to increased economic development. What we have seen all too often are U.S. immigration policies that drain developing countries of their best and brightest, hinder global development, and hurt those whom progressives have fought long to protect. For these reasons, PFIR supports a progressive immigration platform that results in a sustainable U.S. population and encourages global development while reducing the impact that rapid immigration has on the U.S. environment and America's working poor.

**GEMMA:** *What is your background and what brought you to a position of leadership in the immigration reform movement?*

**DURANT:**

Immigration is a topic that has interested me for many years. Immediately prior to joining on at Progressives, I served as a Trial Attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice, where I argued immigration cases before Federal Courts of Appeal. It

was during that time where I saw first-hand the failings of our immigration system and became interested in U.S. population and sustainable living initiatives. Prior to my time at Justice, I served as an attorney for FAIR, the Federation for American Immigration Reform. There I focused on advocacy initiatives, primarily in employment discrimination and promoting citizens' rights. Prior to joining FAIR I worked on immigration as an activist. It was really shortly after 9/11 that I became interested in the impact that lax enforcement had on my home state, in particular on the availability of driver's licenses to illegal aliens. It was then that I

began working to assist policymakers by drafting bills at the state and local levels.

**GEMMA:** *Many people and most of the media have the impression that opposition*

*to illegal immigration is a conservative cause. What concerns overlap and separate the left and right on the issue of immigration?*

**DURANT:** Well, Peter, we believe that immigration levels to the United States should be greatly reduced so as to be consistent with

the national interest. This is a fundamental principle of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, and probably a tenet upon which immigration reductionists on both the left and right can agree. In addition to this basic belief, our position is that the progressive perspective on immigration reform is best accessed through the prism of sustainability, that is, the need for communities, individual nations, and the international community to develop sustainable living scenarios. To do this, two fundamental goals must first be achieved: stabilized populations and reduced consumption.

The world's population grows by



**Leah Durant, Executive Director of Progressives for Immigration Reform, reviews legal documents in her Capitol Hill office on July 29, 2009.**

## PROGRESSIVES FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM

**P**rogressives for Immigration Reform is a non-profit organization that supports the principles of protecting workers' rights and ensuring fair wages for America's workforce. Concerned that the skyrocketing U.S. population has direct implications for a sustainable future, PFIR promotes immigration policies which result in a sustainable population and resource conservation. PFIR advocates for initiatives that provide opportunities for immigrants to improve the economic, health, social and environmental conditions within their own countries. Progressives for Immigration Reform's leadership team includes: William N. Ryerson, president and chair, who has worked in the field of reproductive health for nearly 40 years; vice president Frank Morris, Ph.D., retired Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at Morgan State University and a former executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation; and Vernon M. Briggs, Ph.D., Emeritus Professor of Labor Economics at the New York State School of Labor and Industrial Relations at Cornell University and a former chair of the National Council on Employment Policy.

Resources and data available on PFIR's website\* include:

- The results of a national poll of self-identified liberals and progressives which underscores the broad range of political constituencies involved in and the non-ideological concerns about the current levels of immigration into the United States and the harmful effect that current immigration policies are having on U.S. population growth, the environment, and the availability of jobs. The Pulse Opinion Research survey, conducted in April 2009, revealed:
  - 67 percent of liberals and progressives felt the level of population growth caused by immigration negatively impacts the quality of life in the United States.
  - 58 percent felt that the current levels of immigration are harmful to the environment.
  - 63 percent said that current levels of immigration hurts job prospects for American workers.
- Statistics issued by the Bureau of Labor for January 2009, reveal a national unemployment rate of 7.6 percent, with 11.6 million Americans reportedly out of work. In Fiscal Year 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1.45 million new immigrants gained legal authorization to work in the United States. In addition to these new, legal foreign workers, The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that during that same year, 7.7 million illegal aliens were employed in the United States. Nationally, some estimates for the number of American workers displaced by immigration each year are as high as two million. The large number of new immigrants added to the workforce through legal and legal immigration has major implications on the availability of jobs for many Americans. Unemployment rates in the U.S. are now the highest in over 16 years.
- Projections issued by the U.S. Census Bureau reveal that over the next 50 years the United States is set to add an additional 167 million more to its population, with 105 million resulting solely due to immigration. This projection is an increase of more than 55 percent of the U.S. population today. Immigration accounts for 63 percent of our nation's population growth. For over 30 years, immigration has served as the largest contributor to the increase in U.S. population. As a direct result of its immigration policies, the United States is now the third most populous nation in the entire world and grows at a rate of more than twice that of China. In fact, the United States has the fastest population growth of any industrialized nation, and is surpassed only by India and Nigeria.
- The World Bank determined that roughly between 25-50 percent of individuals having a college education in developing nations lives abroad. By comparison, developing countries have less than 5 percent of their educated working abroad. ■

\*[www.progressivesforimmigrationreform.org](http://www.progressivesforimmigrationreform.org)



**Leah Durant**

82-million people per year, and total international consumption is already beyond the planet's carrying capacity. We believe this is evidenced by the ongoing degradation of our environment, species extinctions, and the list goes on. Here at home, the U.S. grows at an unsustainable rate and consumes nearly 25 percent of the world's resources. The

immigration policy that enables America to participate in the attainment of international sustainability.

Our organization supports an immigration policy that results in allowing approximately 250,000 new immigrants to enter the United States each year and ends policies of chain migration. It is possible our concerns for ecological



### **Leah Durant, Executive Director**

Leah Durant is the Executive Director of Progressives for Immigration Reform, a 501(c)(3) organization which seeks to examine the unintended consequences of U.S. immigration policies and strives to enhance the working conditions of people worldwide. Prior to her tenure at Progressives, Ms. Durant served as an Attorney with the Civil Division of United States Department of Justice. Ms. Durant's experience spans several years of involvement with population and sustainable living initiatives and examining the global impacts of U.S. population growth. Ms. Durant holds a B.A. Degree from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a J.D. from the University of Maryland School of Law.

U.S. is the fastest-growing industrialized nation and grows at a rate of more than twice that of China. Given these facts, it is our position that the U.S. must take responsibility for its ecological footprint and the impact that our growth has on global sustainability.

For that reason, the progressive viewpoint on American sustainability is that the U.S. must retool its economic model in two ways: 1) to reduce overall consumption and 2) to adopt an

sustainability and the need to promote a model for international sustainability likely distinguish PFIR from those on the right seeking immigration reductions.

**GEMMA:** *Why does an open borders policy have such appeal on the left?*

**DURANT:** In the past, I think that many liberals who support open borders have desperately sought to characterize immigration as a human rights issue.

However, large-scale immigration to the United States does nothing to improve the lives of the nearly 3 billion people in the world who survive on less than \$2 per day and is no panacea for the desperate plight of billions who do not make it in. For these reasons, we believe that the goal should not be to support a perpetual increase in the number of people allowed to enter the country, but rather to promote policies that further economic development in countries worldwide.

**GEMMA:** *Are politically liberal immigration reform activists in a better position to offset the pro-immigration lobby?*

**DURANT:** Although immigration is necessarily a bi-partisan issue requiring activists from both political parties, we believe that it is likely among liberals and Democrats who control both houses of Congress that the immigration issue will be decided. PFIR is in a key position to help determine the outcome.

**GEMMA:** *What are the prospects for immigration reform under the Obama Administration? The Christian Science Monitor recently reported that the President's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, said "The votes aren't there" to liberalize immigration laws.*

**DURANT:** It is interesting that the



Administration has done nothing short of sending mixed signals with regard to their intentions on this issue. I think Democrats understand that any form of amnesty would be a hard sell given current rates of unemployment.

**GEMMA:** *Besides PFIR, are other non-conservatives supporting immigration reform?*

**DURANT:** That's a great question, Peter. Notwithstanding the agenda of those who wish to paint immigration reform as a conservative issue, the fact is that many liberals, past and present, are in favor of

reducing immigration. Our organization is based on the work of the late Barbara Jordan, a very liberal African-American civil rights attorney and leader in the Democratic Party who chaired the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform. Barbara Jordan took a strong stance in favor of reducing immigration so as to serve the national interest, and to protect America's poor.

Today, many leading environmentalists continue the legacy of advocating for reducing immigration so as to achieve population stabilization. Liberals have had a storied history of fighting for immigration reductions to protect the rights of American workers and preserve the environment.

**GEMMA:** *I understand your critics on the*

*left have been particularly intolerant of PFIR. The radical Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) says liberals supporting immigration reform are “bitter enemies of immigrants.” What do you say in response?*

**DURANT:** Well, I am glad to have the opportunity to address this, Peter, because according to groups like the SPLC, one can only be pro-immigrant by supporting policies of uncontrolled large-scale immigration. Look, it is important for readers to understand that the SPLC has lost much of its credibility over the years, by sensationalizing hate groups, both real and imagined, as a marketing tactic. In fact, in a 2000 article published by *Harper’s* magazine, it was suggested that the SPLC is little more than a profit-seeking direct mail organization calculated to capitalize on “white guilt.”

The fact is that as an African American woman, I am personally appalled at any organization that seeks to characterize me, or anyone else who seeks to achieve a rational immigration policy, as racist or nativist. These tactics of dirty mud slinging are inherently dishonest and are undertaken only as a means to avoid having an honest discussion altogether. Mass immigration is simply not a policy that liberals should support because it ensures that those most vulnerable Americans at the bottom end of the economic scale will remain there. This is the real social injustice.

Progressives for Immigration Reform is pro-immigrant and seeks to achieve a rational immigration policy that serves the

interests of both immigrants and native-born alike. The fact that Progressives for Immigration Reform is concerned by the magnitude of legal and illegal immigration is based on the evidence that having nearly half a billion people living in the U.S. by 2050 is likely unsustainable with regard to energy consumption, availability of fresh water, and preservation of wilderness and biodiversity. In addition, the impact of high rates of immigration on low-wage working Americans is devastating. The organization is not looking at issues of race or national origin of immigrants. My question to the SPLC is whether it is their position that the U.S. should open its borders with no regard for the environmental impact or impact on working Americans—especially during the worst economic recession seen in years.

**GEMMA:** *Finally, what are the plans and prospects for PFIR?*

**DURANT:** Since opening our doors in January of this year, Progressives for Immigration Reform has been flooded with an overwhelmingly positive response from liberals on this issue. Our organization plans to continue its outreach and will advocate for reduced levels of immigration to the U.S., through various projects and publications.

Public opinion polls demonstrate that stabilizing the size of U.S. population is a concept that most Americans are willing to embrace. PFIR will work to achieve the goal of environmental sustainability by ending policies of overpopulation and chain migration that serve to fuel U.S. population growth. ■