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What Do You Mean “We”? **by Sheldon Richman**

To say the least, there is tension between the ideas that we live in a free society and that government may determine whom we may sell to, rent to, and hire. This is the real heart of the immigration debate. Who should decide such things, free individuals or the state?

This question is obscured by the democratic myth. People often say, “We as a nation have the right to decide who comes here and who doesn’t. So we must get control of our borders.” The problem with this is that “we as a nation” don’t do anything. Individuals act, sometimes in concert with other individuals, but collectives do nothing. When we say “the nation does such and such,” we mean a group of politicians calling themselves “the government” and claiming to act for the nation do such and such. It’s true that in a society such as ours people vote for officeholders. But the connection between punching out a chad in a polling station and politicians’ making immigration policy is, shall we say, roundabout. It is so roundabout that it makes no sense at all to say that punching out a chad is the same as determining immigration policy. That’s a fairy tale. It’s time we became men and women and put away childish things.

Note that to the extent that “we” exercise the “collective freedom” of determining who can and can’t come here, real flesh-and-blood individuals lose that freedom. The *Washington Post* reports that immigration authorities are cracking down on employers who hire immigrants who have not complied with the bureaucratic demands made of them. The *Post* states, “Serious criminal charges once typically reserved for drug traffickers and organized-crime figures are increasingly being used to target businesses that employ illegal immigrants, a strategy highlighted last week when three Maryland restaurateurs pleaded guilty to federal offenses and agreed to forfeit more than \$1 million in cash and property. The little-publicized approach, which can include charging such employers with money laundering [!] and seizing their assets, amounts to a strategic shift in the enforcement of immigration law in the workplace.” You can get 10 years for harboring illegals, 20 for money laundering.

The assistant secretary of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, put it plainly: “If you’re blatantly violating our worksite enforcement laws, we’ll go after your Mercedes and your mansion and your millions. We’ll go after everything we can, and we’ll charge you criminally.”

“Our worksite enforcement laws”? So much for free enterprise. Funny how the alleged party of the free market can be at the head of the mob demanding draconian sanctions against people who hire the “wrong” people. It’s not hard to divine the true priorities of that party.

In all the blather about immigration, no one has stepped up to explain why, in what Mencken called the land of the theoretically free, individuals are not free to hire and sell and rent to whomever they wish. If I want to rent an apartment to and employ a Mexican, that’s no one’s business but my own, regardless of whether he’s cleared some arbitrary bureaucratic hurdles. The politicians should butt out, which in an earlier time was the essence of Americanism. I don’t think the government school curriculum features that very prominently.

The usual reply to my “it’s no one else’s business” argument is that immigrants create harmful spillover effects. They use the schools, hospital emergency rooms, and so on. But notice that in that list of strained facilities, you never find Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Sears. Why is it that private businesses have no trouble handling increasing numbers of customers? Only welfare-state facilities can’t take it. Maybe there’s a message here. And maybe immigrants are being scapegoated for the government’s failings.

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