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Immigration Policy Reveals What We Are by Sheldon Richman

The new compromise immigration bill is drawing lots of flak, not least from conservatives who object to granting amnesty to millions of so-called illegal aliens in the country. (I prefer to think of them as independent migrants.) Here I have to agree with the conservatives. The illegals shouldn't be granted amnesty. Amnesty connotes forgiveness for doing something wrong — and they have done nothing wrong. Indeed, the government should be asking forgiveness from *them*.

But they broke the law to get into the country. Did they? They weren't under the jurisdiction of the U.S. government until *after* they entered the country. It's amusing that conservatives think illegals are covered by the law but not by the Constitution. Talk about having it both ways. The Constitution and Bill of Rights do not distinguish between citizens and noncitizens. Besides, there is no obligation to obey an immoral law.

But they came into our country without permission, conservative talker Tucker Carlson and his ilk say incessantly. Without whose permission? The whole population of the United States? The federal government? Why the assumption that either of those aggregates can have the right to give or withhold permission for someone to relocate here? This is a country, not a country club, and rights are natural not national. If someone wants to come here and can do so without trespassing on private property, that's his right and his own business.

Which bring us to something that conservatives need to explain. Why do they applaud “tough sanctions” against employers who hire illegals? Aren't they advocates of free enterprise? It turns out they are as enthusiastic for social engineering as any state socialist. They are willing to curtail economic freedom when it clashes with their cherished goal of planning the composition of the U.S. population. With friends like these, free enterprise hardly needs enemies. Their demand for tamper-proof identification doesn't flatter them either.

If conservatives don't like the guest-worker aspect of the immigration bill, I'm with them. But my reasons are different. How degrading such a program is. Mr. and Ms. Immigrant, we don't want you to move here as a free person to live and work as you wish. But we are happy to bring you here for a few years to do some heavy lifting, after which we will send you back. Dash that.

The nativists can't quite make up their minds whether their chief fear about immigrants is jobs and wages or welfare. No need to lose sleep over either. Immigrants are consumers as well as workers, so they help expand the market and summon more production into existence. The fear about wages is misplaced, since the small effect is quickly offset by the demand immigrants add to the market and the increased investment they make possible.

As for welfare, conservatives really ought to be ashamed of themselves. Even if immigrants wanted to live off the taxpayers (they don't seem to), why would conservatives try to save the welfare state from such strains? There is no better way to convince the American people to dump the welfare state than to show them it is financially unsustainable.

As for the stresses on schools and hospitals, it's been said once but apparently needs to be said again: only government services abhor an increase in the number of customers. Private retailers don't lobby against letting more consumers into the country.

Border security is an issue for demagogues. Timothy McVeigh crossed state borders to commit terrorism in Oklahoma City, but you didn't hear the "secure the border" mob call for internal passports and walls along state lines. Leave crime to the normal law-enforcement institutions.

Immigration is an emblematic issue. What kind of country are we if we refuse to recognize such a basic right as the right to move?

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