



How I Rethought Immigration

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The last time America debated amnesty for illegal aliens, I was on the other side. The year was 1986. I was a student at law school and an occasional contributor to this magazine. I believed then that immigration was a great thing, the more the better. I believed that illegal immigration resulted from government failure to set immigration quotas high enough to meet the economy's needs. And I believed that amnesty constituted a reasonable and, really, the only possible response to the problem.

Where did I get these beliefs? How did I lose them?

Here's my story. Maybe it reminds you of your own.

Open to the Future . . .

How could you not enthuse over immigration if you were born in the Toronto of four decades ago?

A story goes that a visiting British newspaperman passed through town to give some lectures on the world war just ended. "Where are you staying?" asked the hostess. "I rented a room on Jarvis Street," the journalist answered. The hostess was shocked, Jarvis Street then being the local skid row. "Jarvis Street isn't a very good address," she said. "Madam, Toronto isn't a very good address."

Toronto in 1950 had been a grim provincial town whose leading idea of fun was selling dubious mining shares to gullible investors. ("Toronto the Good" fiercely policed liquor and obscenity, but took a rather more permissive attitude to the no-

torious local stock exchange.) But there was one thing Toronto did offer, and in abundance: security. Peace, order, good government--the Canadian promise. And after the tumult of depression and war, peace, order, and good government were just what hundreds of thousands of displaced Poles, Greeks, Italians, Chinese, Hungarians, Jews, Vietnamese, Ukrainians desperately craved.

Between 1950 and 1970 the population of Toronto increased significantly. The city's increase in wealth and sophistication was even more substantial. I was born in 1960, just old enough to remember the old town--young enough to be dazzled by the new immigrant-welcoming metropolis. Skyscrapers tinted in gold soared over sidewalk cafés. A hungry student with \$10 in his pocket could take his choice from Hungarian schnitzel or Hong Kong dim sum, Jamaican pasties or Punjabi curry. In two hours' walk along Bloor Street, you could pass from Greece to Poland, with Korea, the Philippines, and half a dozen countries in between, without crime, strife, or any serious ethnic tension. To a great extent, you still can.

As I look back on it now, I am amazed at how unamazing I found this great civic achievement. Then again, I'd grown up thinking that there could be nothing more easy and natural than migration back and forth across borders. My father's family had fled bullying and boycotts in Poland and settled in Canada in 1930. One of my paternal grandfather's brothers and one of his sisters migrated to Palestine at the same

time. All the rest--his father, mother, and four brothers--were murdered. One brother survived the camps and found refuge in Israel after World War II.

My mother's family came from the border town of Niagara Falls. My grandmother had grown up in Niagara Falls, N.Y.; my grandfather, in Niagara Falls, Ont. They married in 1935, and since my grandfather's business lay on the Canadian side of the line, they made their home in the north.

My grandmother lived in Canada for the next seven decades on a U.S. passport. For many years, she taught English literature at a high school in Niagara Falls, N.Y. As a boy, I'd often drive with her across the Rainbow Bridge to her class. The border guards would greet us as we pulled up in her huge Oldsmobile: "Good morning Mrs. Rosberg, may I see some identification, please?"

Of my grandmother's three children, the eldest (my mother) was born American and naturalized Canadian. The youngest (my uncle) was born Canadian and naturalized American. Only the middle child (my aunt) stayed Canadian all the way through.

Nor was this experience anomalous. My wife's grandfather, for example, was an American born in upstate New York. Wanting to enter World War I before his country did, he joined the Canadian Army, rose through the ranks, and ended up founding and commanding the Canadian Armoured Corps.

My younger self perceived these crossings of the 49th parallel not as a unique legacy of a common continental culture, but as an example for how the rest of the world should and could live. As a free marketer, I believed in the free movement of goods and capital across international borders. Why not people too? The great free-market intellectual revolution of the 1970s had hit my generation like an avalanche. Of course we knew that markets are human institutions, which function or fail depending on the laws that govern them. Of course we knew that human behavior was guided as much by culture and habit as by economic rationality. We knew those things--but we did not think about them very much.

... But Open to Evidence

Three years after Ronald Reagan signed the 1986 amnesty, I was married, living in Brooklyn, and working for the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page. If Toronto prejudiced me in favor of open borders, David Dinkins's New York seemed to seal the case. America's greatest city seemed to be gasping--and immigration seemed to be the one breath of life that sustained it. From the Korean greengrocers who sold fresh produce in neighborhoods from which grocery chains had long fled, to the Polish painters imported to replaster ornamental ceilings, to the young Irish people gentrifying warehouses in Brooklyn, to the Indian MBAs on the trading floors of the investment banks--immigrants seemed to feel a confidence in the future of the city shared by few of the native-born. When Afrocentric agita-

tors picketed Korean shops to protest the owners' refusal to shrug off shoplifting, whose side would any decent person take?

So what happened? The short answer is: It's all Bob Bartley's fault. The legendarily pro-open-borders editor of the *Journal* liked to give his staffers "beats." Bartley assigned me the income-inequality debate. From 1989 to 1991, some of the most dramatic and exhilarating years of the 20th century, while my colleagues covered wars and revolutions, I was trudging my way through reports from Brookings and AEI on what exactly was happening to the American middle class. Always the glamour jobs!

And yet, in their way, those studies and reports contained information as unexpected, startling, and radical as anything coming out of Eastern Europe. I had never appreciated the sheer scale of the immigration surge: almost 2 million legal entries in 1991--close to half the number of births that year--plus who knew how many illegals. And, in stark contradiction to all my preconceptions about immigration, the immigrants who had arrived in the United States since 1970 were not doing very well. They were arriving poor, and they were staying poor for decades. Ominous warning signs were gathering that their children would stay poor too.

It was customary to draw a sharp line dividing (bad) illegal immigration from (good) legal immigration. But the more closely you studied the issue, the more problematic that line became. "Illegal" immigration was

not "illegal" in the same way that, say, illegal drugs were. Since the 1970s, the U.S. government had tacitly allowed illegal immigrants a quasi-protected status. In 1979, the Immigration Service ended its long policy of raiding residences in search of illegals. In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that children present in the country illegally nonetheless possessed a constitutional right to a free public education. The promises of effective enforcement that accompanied the 1986 amnesty were never honored. I began to think that it made more sense to think of immigration policy as a whole, with a tacitly accepted "illegality" just as much a part of the structure as the genius visas for aliens of extraordinary ability. Immigrants could start legal (by entering on, say, a temporary visa), become illegal (by overstaying their visa), and then legalize themselves again (by marriage or sponsorship or amnesty).

I also began to learn that you could hardly name a social problem without discovering that immigration was aggravating it to the point of unsolvability.

Health insurance? Immigrants accounted for about one-quarter of the uninsured in the early 1990s, and about one-third of the increase in the uninsured population at that time.

Social spending? The Urban Institute estimated in 1994 that educating the children of illegal aliens cost the State of California almost \$1.5 billion per year.

Wage pressure on the less-skilled? The wages of less-skilled Americans

had come under ferocious pressure since 1970. How could you even begin to think about this issue without recognizing the huge immigration-driven increase in the supply of unskilled labor over the same period?

Competitiveness? How could the U.S. remain the world's most productive nation while simultaneously remixing its population to increase dramatically the proportion of poorly educated people within it?

A 1997 study by the National Academy of Sciences found virtually zero net benefit to the U.S. economy from immigration. Immigration yielded benefits, true--but also costs in the form of lower wages and higher social-welfare burdens. Balance costs and benefits against each other, as a rational policymaker should, and you arrived at a favorable balance of \$10 billion, less than a tenth of a percentage point in a \$12 trillion economy.

And this favorable balance was composed in a way that would normally disturb a rational policymaker: The largest share of the benefits went to the immigrants themselves, and almost all of the rest to people at the top of society. Almost all of the costs were borne by people at the bottom.

As it happened, I myself was one of those winners. My green card came through in 1996. And by education and income, I belonged to the economic elite who profited so handsomely from the 1990s boom. Years later, my elder daughter would ask me to explain why immigration was so controversial. I tried to describe

the debate as fairly as I could, explaining who was helped and who was injured. She absorbed my description, and then asked: "So Daddy, why are we against it?"

Of course I wasn't *against* it, not exactly. The right kind of immigration policy--one that opened the borders of nations such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia to moderate numbers of newcomers who knew the language, obeyed the law, shared national values, possessed useful skills, and paid more in taxes than they consumed in services--such an immigration seemed to me then and seems to me still a very good thing.

Scenes from the Class Struggle

As a conservative, I had spent much of my life gleefully pointing out how liberalism repackaged selfish special interests as "compassion": schools run for the benefit of unionized teachers, not students; welfare that served administrators rather than the poor; trade protections that enriched favored industries at the expense of the general public. But now, when I discussed immigration with my friends and fellow conservatives, I heard reasoning that might have embarrassed the crudest Tammany Hall pork-barreler.

At an elegant book party on a Connecticut lawn, one acquaintance smilingly explained her point of view: "How else will I get my flower beds done?"

Lord knows, I heard a lot of self-interest dressed up as public policy during my years as an editorial-page editor. But the flacks and lobbyists

who pressed their clients' cases at least accepted some obligation to frame a convincing argument that what was good (for example) for the plastic-pail industry was good for America. With immigration, somehow the rules were different.

The class divide was widening in 1990s America; anybody with eyes could see that. Yet most of the ideas you heard for addressing this problem--trade protection, income redistribution--offered a cure worse than the disease. And immigration was worsening the inequality problem without offering any significant social benefit. The case for reform seemed more than overwhelming. It seemed compulsory. On the other hand, the issue often seemed to bring out the worst on the pro-reform side as well. In the late 1980s, a group of self-described "paleoconservatives" had congealed around the magazine *Chronicles*. For them, the great issue was not incomes, but race. They mixed their ferocious hostility to immigration with savage denunciations of the civil-rights movement of the 1960s--and, for that matter, the Union cause in the 1860s.

The just-hatched Internet then started to sprout websites devoted entirely to the immigration issue. All too often, the immigration reformers decided to perceive no-enemies-to-the-racialist-right. They might be exclusionist at the borders of the nation; at their own port of entry, however, they lifted their lamp to welcome people who wanted to argue the intellectual inferiority of African Americans, or compared federal law-enforcement agents to the Gestapo, or insisted the Jews had

brought the Holocaust upon themselves, or despised America's Spanish-speaking neighbors as inferiors and enemies, or dined with David Duke. Has ever a cause been worse served by its alleged advocates? The immigration debate all too often reminded me of the description of the English Civil War in *1066 and All That*: a battle between the Wrong but Wromantic and the Right but Repulsive.

Immigration was the greatest ideological qualm I had to overcome when I went to work for President George W. Bush. Who knew? Perhaps I might even be able to do some small measure of good. I knew the president's own convictions leaned toward open borders. But circumstances often push presidents in very different directions from those in which they at first intend to go.

And so it seemed to be happening in September 2001, when Vicente Fox paid his state visit to his great friend Jorge. The Mexican position on immigration was so aggressive, intransigent, and one-sided as to wreck negotiations before they could even begin. Days later, foreign terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. Now, I thought, change would have to come. The attacks revealed immigration not just as a crucial economic and social issue, but also as vital to national security. The 9/11 hijackers would have been caught a dozen times over by a society that enforced its immigration rules. Soon afterward, Americans were reading about bombings in Spain, murders in Amsterdam, and car burnings in Paris.

You might think that a trauma like 9/11 would have prompted a major rethink of its immigration policies by the Bush administration. You would think wrong. While enforcement was tightened in certain concentrated areas, elsewhere it actually relaxed. Immigration from the Middle East reached an all-time peak in 2005. Altogether, an estimated 8 million people settled in the U.S. in the first six years of the Bush administration, at least half of them illegally. In 2004, 2006, and now again in 2007, the president has attempted to push through legalization and guest-worker programs.

Neither the president nor his inner circle has ever cared to hear from dissenters on this issue. A hasty and careless economic calculus, a poorly considered political gamble, and self-righteous moral grandstanding have together pushed the president to the worst domestic political and policy error of his presidency.

It seems impossible that the immigration bill can succeed: A large majority of the American people claim to be following the immigration debate closely, and that majority opposes the immigration plan by a three-to-one majority. And when the bill collapses, it will take what little remains of the president's political capital with it. Did I say capital? No, that has long since been spent. It is his credit that he is now exhausting.

Out of this disaster, however, comes some hope. The national debate triggered by the Senate's catastrophic reform has accelerated the great rethinking of immigration on the part of many millions of Americans.

The backroom deal that produced this latest law epitomized decades of collusion between the two parties to suppress open discussion of this vi-

tal issue. This time, at last, the collusion failed. Democracy has erupted. I'm ready to make my voice heard. How about you?

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