

From Commonsense to Nonsense

Anti-immigration wave impacts more than just "the illegals."

The Washington Post
November 9, 2007

WASHINGTON -- The governor of New York says he wants to make roads safer, improve the performance of the police, and save insured motorists about \$120 million a year in premiums. But so far his plan is stalled.

Gov. Eliot Spitzer thought the state could grant driver's licenses to any resident who could pass a driving test and prove his or her identity -- regardless of immigration status. The plan, Spitzer thought, made common sense: Let's find out who is on the road, and be more confident that they know the rules, carry insurance, and therefore would be less likely to flee the scene of an accident.

It took all of five weeks of vitriolic attacks to turn common sense into nonsense. In an obvious reversal, Spitzer announced two weeks ago that he now supports federal requirements that make eligibility for a driver's license even stricter. He says he also prefers that his state issue second-tier driving documents that would be available to illegal immigrants. It is hard to imagine immigrants here illegally applying for a document that so singles them out.

Three years ago, a Maryland task force studying the issue recommended not to ban illegal immigrants from securing driver's licenses. State Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez said the task force determined that public safety easily trumped immigration concerns. Now, she said in an interview this week, political pressures would make it "very difficult to maintain that recommendation."

The frenzy over illegal immigration is such these days that any measure hinting of being a benefit to those here illegally -- even if the public good outweighs a modest gain for the immigrant -- is likely to be shot down.

Such was the case of the federal Dream Act, which would have granted permanent legal residency to children of illegal immigrants who have not had a run-in with the law, attended college for at least two years, or served in the military. Similarly, officials in Herndon, Va., closed a day-laborer center rather than comply with a court ruling that determined it had to serve all workers, legal or illegal. Now, workers are back on street corners and in parking lots looking for jobs, once again prompting a public outcry and negating the outcome the center was opened to provide.

The anti-immigrant wave also makes it harder for public safety personnel to do their jobs.

Police chiefs and police associations say that requiring officers to become enforcers of immigration laws jeopardizes their ability to maintain public order by discouraging an entire class of people from reporting crimes and seeking police assistance. As one

commander from Maryland put it, success "relies on residents contemplating the police as an ally in the fight against crime, not an enemy."

Similar distrust keeps immigrants from seeking medical care when they need it, which in turn can potentially threaten the health of the broader population. Health experts say that preventive care such as vaccinations for children can forestall severe health problems, including the spread of infections. Still, a 2005 Harvard Medical School study found that children of immigrants received about one-fourth of the care of those with U.S.-born parents.

"It is true that the immigration issue has raised attention around the country and provoked very strong emotion," says Justin Levitt, counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's School of Law. "There are some who are trading on those emotions (but) that's never a sound public policy approach."

For years, Levitt has been looking into the emotionally charged issue of voter fraud, including by, you guessed it, illegal immigrants. While most of these allegations have proved to be unfounded, political pressure continues for requiring photo identification at the ballot box. Levitt calls such demands a bad solution for a nonexistent problem. He believes that in the process, a real problem of disenfranchisement could be created by making it harder for millions of citizens -- primarily poor, elderly or minorities -- to vote.

Clearly, the victims of this anti-immigrant frenzy are not just "the illegals." Unfortunately, it doesn't look as though an end to this predicament will come any time soon. In the months ahead it will be even more difficult for local and state governments to adopt reasonable measures concerning immigration as candidates continue to leverage people's emotions on the subject. Even the election of a new president next year might not mark the end of the federal impasse, either. Some analysts already are speculating that any effort to revive comprehensive immigration reform will remain a nonstarter until a second term, if there is one.