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US IMMIGRATION & NATIONALITY LAW

IMMIGRANTS CAN BOOST THE ECONOMY

Posted on January 26, 2009 by Cyrus Mehta

by
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With the euphoria of President Obama's historic inauguration and his quick moves to bring about transparency and accountability in government, as well as due process by ordering the closing of Guantanamo and other secret CIA prisons overseas, it remains to be seen whether immigrants will get a boost or not with more visionary, just and rational policies.

Most are of the opinion that with the economy in a state of collapse, any immigration reform, even by a well intentioned administration, will be put on the back burner for some time. The natural reaction is that how can anything be done to boost immigration when there are millions of Americans without jobs.

However, this response, which is reflexive during hard economic times, can be countered with the following pointers:

- Most of the over 12 million undocumented immigrants are not going anywhere despite the collapsed economy, according to a recent report of the Migration Policy Institute (http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/lmi_recessionJan09.pdf). While immigration has slowed in recent times, there is no definitive trend of immigrants returning to their home countries, according to the MPI report. They continue to remain in the US and many also continue to hold jobs and work hard with the hope that they and their families will some day legalize. Immigrants who are already here with jobs will not displace American workers.

- Legalizing their status will inspire confidence among them, and they will

act on long postponed economic decisions such as buying a home, which in turn will greatly help the economy.

- Immigrants who have legalized will more likely receive a regular wage on payroll. This in turn will result in more income taxes and further contributions to our social security and Medicare system. Getting infusions from new immigrations might be the only way to save these systems from going bankrupt.
- Immigrants in the US will also buy more goods and products. This in turn can spur demand. They will also pay sales tax on these goods.
- Immigrants will also be able to bring capital and savings from overseas into the US.
- Immigrants, who have come to the US to make a better life for themselves and their kids, will naturally be very ambitious and industrious. This in turn will lead to more entrepreneurship in the US, which will create more jobs.
- Despite the recession, there are skills that are still needed in the US especially in IT fields, green jobs, education, health care, etc. Even with respect to sectors that have been decimated, such as financial services or the automobile industry, there is always space for talented immigrants who can innovate, stay productive and generate profits. Even at the lower end of the skills spectrum, immigrants are needed to pluck fruit on farms, cook in restaurants and take care of babies and the elderly.
- Many skilled and professional immigrants have been waiting for years in the pipeline for a green card. If we do not expand employment-based visa quotas, these people who are contributing to the US, after having been educated in American universities, will give up and leave. Would it not be a waste for an environmental scientist to leave the US after he or she received an MS degree from an American University?

In sum, Comprehensive Immigration Reform is needed more than even during this terrible economic downturn. It might well be one of the solutions for the boosting the economy. How about including a measure in the stimulus package that is being deliberated by the Congress to jump start the economy?

While this essay focuses on how immigrants can be a benefit for the economy, it would be incomplete to view immigration as only being a benefit to the economy. Indeed, the country will also be better off in its values if due process rights for immigrants are restored too. The American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) in a press release has called upon the new Obama Administration "to eschew the harsh, indiscrimate, "enforcement-only" policies of the past 8 years in favor of a more rational and just approach to immigration policy that restores the rule of law and serves America's core economic, security, and humanitarian interests."

Indeed, the following passage from President Obama's inauguration speech, best sums up the new mood of the nation:

For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus - and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

We do hope that President Obama, the son of a Kenyan national and a woman from Kansas, inspires the comprehensive change we so badly need in immigration policy.

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