

Immigration - 1995

God upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)

Issue

The loss of confidence in government and the current economic climate have created a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States and Canada which threatens to undermine the tradition of North America as a haven for the oppressed and a land of opportunity.

Background

From the very first Biennial Assembly in 1915 to the present time, the Women of Reform Judaism has advocated a fair, generous and non-discriminatory immigration policy. This policy is in jeopardy in the United States as Congress seeks to redefine it in terms of welfare reform and immigration control and as states seek to reduce their financial responsibility for social services and education for illegal as well as legal aliens. It is also in jeopardy in Canada as the federal elections in November 1993 saw political voices question Canada's need to remain committed to refugee protection and family reunification. The Canadian commitment to immigration itself is being eroded as well by the current economic climate.

During the 80's and 90's U.S. immigration reached the previous peak decade of 1901-1910; one million immigrants a year became lawful permanent residents. Presently immigration policy is based on family reunification, labor needs (especially highly-skilled professionals), fear of persecution and diversity in American society. This has brought a major change in the immigrants' countries of origin. In 1965 under the national quota system about 85% came from European countries; today about 85% come from Latin America and Asia.

While there are about 300,000 illegal immigrants in the United States, this figure does not include the million or more who enter each year as workers and move back and forth across the border. Six states have sought restitution from the U.S. government for the cost of social services for illegal aliens who are ineligible for many federal programs except for emergency health care and education for their children. California passed Proposition 187 in 1994 which denies illegal immigrants most state social services except in cases of medical emergency. Enforcement of this law is currently under a restraining order.

The U.S. Immigration and Control Act of 1986 set up an employer verification system that was aimed at identifying illegal workers and stopping the flow of illegal immigrants. However, this system has proven to be ineffective because of the ease of obtaining false documents.

The U.S. Immigration Act of 1990 mandated the establishment of a Commission on Immigration Reform to assess U.S. immigration policy and make recommendations regarding its implementation and effects. The Commission issued an interim report in 1994 in which it rejected efforts to scapegoat immigrants for economic and social problems for which they are not responsible and concluded that control of immigration is a responsibility of a democratic society. Among the recommendations was more effective U.S. border management to control illegal aliens and facilitate legal entry. However border control is not a solution for nearly half the illegal migrant population who enter legally but overstay their temporary visas. To deal with this problem

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the Commission called for work-force enforcement based on a national identification registry.

In 1978 Canada passed a new Immigration Act which articulated, as one of its objectives, the creation of policies which “are consistent with Canada’s humanitarian tradition toward the persecuted and displaced.” Canada has been a world leader in developing laws, policies and programs which have allowed tens of thousands of refugees from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe to find permanent asylum in Canada.

Since the mid-1980’s, however, the climate has changed. Canada’s “ceiling” (quota) for government sponsored refugees has dropped from almost 15 thousand to under 7 thousand. In general terms, Canada is decreasing its ceilings for family reunification cases (family class sponsorships) as well as for skilled immigrants. But since its five year plan, announced in November 1994, the federal government publicized its intention to progressively lower the number of family class (parents, grandparents) immigrants in favor of more skilled immigrants.

After the federal budget of February 1994, Canada imposed the “right of landing fee” on all immigrants, including refugees. For refugees, the federal government already provides loans to refugees to cover travel and medical clearance costs. Loans were offered to refugees for the right of landing fees. This means that refugees resettled in Canada arrive encumbered with thousands of dollars of debt.

Resolution

In keeping with our religious tradition which mandates respect for the alien and the stranger and in full accord that immigrants have enriched our North American societies, the Women of Reform Judaism calls on United States and Canadian Sisterhoods to:

1. Advocate immigration policies which are consistent with the North American tradition of welcoming newcomers and granting them civil liberties and civil rights.
2. Encourage eligible immigrants and permanent residents to apply for citizenship to guarantee for themselves the full range of benefits of citizenship.
3. Request our governments to maintain at the very least the current levels of admission of refugees and to increase funding at federal, state and provincial levels for resettlement services.
4. Urge their legislative delegations and elected officials not to deny legal immigrants the benefits to which they have been entitled and to continue to provide illegal immigrants with emergency and preventative health care and public education.
5. Support a system for verifying work authorization that is fraud-resistant, nondiscriminatory, protects civil liberties and insures privacy of information. At the present time the proposed national identification registry based on social security numbers or national identity cards does not fulfill all these requirements.
6. Study the complex issues surrounding immigration policy:
 1. United States issues include border management, work-site enforcement, benefit eligibility and fiscal impact, criminal aliens, immigration emergencies and refugee status.
 2. Canadian issues include unfair financial burdens on immigrants, family class sponsorships, deportations from Canada, interdiction of improperly documented would-be travelers to Canada at airports abroad and spontaneous arrival of refugee claimants.

Further WRJ calls upon its affiliates worldwide to examine immigration policies of their respective nations and when necessary, become advocates for appropriate change.

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