

Immigrant bashing not a solution

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Body

With Congress and the federal government basically paralyzed in dealing with illegal immigration, state officials are under a lot of political pressure to do something --- anything --- to ease the problem.

That's dangerous, because most policy changes at the state level amount to little more than mean-spirited **immigrant bashing**. They accomplish nothing except to advance a few political careers and make life more difficult for people already struggling day to day.

Here in Georgia, for example, state legislators have introduced a whole batch of legislation that purports to address the illegal **immigrant** problem. They include bills that would block illegal **immigrants** from receiving social services; a proposed constitutional amendment that would bar the children of illegal **immigrants** from attending public schools; and proposals that would require Georgia businesses to verify the legal work status of job applicants before hiring them.

The bills denying social services to illegal **immigrants** have a lot of public support, according to a poll for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, with 57 percent of Georgians saying they back such a bill. To Republican legislative leaders, those results give them all the encouragement they need to ensure those bills become law, especially in an election year.

The bills requiring Georgia employers to verify the legal work status of job applicants draw even stronger public support, with 80 percent saying they back that approach. More importantly, that's one state policy that could actually cut illegal immigration by reducing the economic incentive to come here.

But popular as they are, those bills will never get out of committee, because the same political leadership willing to make life painful for illegal **immigrants** also appreciate the **immigrants'** economic importance to Georgia. They'll **bash** the illegal **immigrant** as a way to win votes, but they'll do nothing that might threaten the **immigrants'** contribution to our prosperity.

That's the central hypocrisy, the fundamental and almost unspoken amorality at the core of the immigration issue. And to his credit, Gov. Sonny Perdue is willing to at least acknowledge that contradiction.

"The fact is there's been a certain degree of hypocrisy within the overall community in the United States regarding using the work force, using the labor of people who come in [with] illegal or undocumented status," Perdue said this

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week. He noted the contribution of illegal **immigrants** working in Georgia's poultry processing, construction and landscaping industries, "and yet we talk about the burden that they are."

Perdue supports denial of social services to illegal **immigrants**, but he draws the line at barring them from education. "The governor understands that the long-range costs of **not** educating people exceed the long-range costs of educating them," spokesperson Heather Hedrick said Wednesday.

That's a rare bit of honesty and logic in a debate with too little of both. In fact, honesty is the dynamite needed to break apart the logjam on this issue.

First, it's important to admit that illegal immigration threatens this nation economically, politically, socially and morally. Some on the left have been unwilling to make that admission for political reasons, but it is true nonetheless.

Second, we also have to admit that illegal **immigrants** are the victims of this mess, **not** its villains, a reality that those on the right find inconvenient. Yes, under our laws they are illegal, but our government makes a limited, maybe even token effort to stop them at the border, and almost no effort whatsoever to prevent them from finding work. We do everything but invite them here, because business finds their labor so useful. And once they get here, we use their illegal status as a way to banish them to the fringes of our communities and our consciousness.

A rational immigration policy must be twofold:

First, it would recognize economic necessity by significantly increasing the number of people allowed to come here legally and begin the path toward citizenship. Such a policy would also be far more humane, because it would yank those now exiled to the shadow world up into the sunlight with the rest of us.

Second, federal laws must require employers to hire only those here legally, with harsh penalties and strict enforcement to ensure compliance. Even combined with stricter border controls, that won't eliminate illegal immigration. But it can at least reduce it to levels that the country can absorb.

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