

THE ROCKY ROAD TO CITIZENSHIP

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Body

Seldom have the telephones at this newspaper rung so fast and furiously as they have since Monday, when we opened lines for immigrants seeking **citizenship** advice in partnership with CUNY. Serving readers is a pleasure, but this has been particularly gratifying because the goal for thousands of callers was to take the U.S. oath of allegiance.

Never let it be said that the city's immigrants have not taken America to heart in large numbers. Said Marva Spencer, who was born in Trinidad, "I think if I become a U.S. citizen, I will be able to voice my opinion more. I will be able to vote."

Why, then, do too many immigrants wait so long to file for **citizenship**? Some will never be comfortable shedding homeland identities, but huge numbers are daunted by an immigration system that is a world-class bureaucratic nightmare. One caller waited five years to be sworn in after his **citizenship** interview. Another filed **citizenship** applications for herself, her brother and mother a year ago and has yet to get a case number. Those stories are not unusual.

Immigrants wait years to get the green card that grants permanent residence. Then they wait at least five years to apply for **citizenship**. Then, here in New York, they have to sit tight for an average of 17 months to get sworn, hoping they will not fall prey to lost paperwork or other glitches. One fellow got to his swearing-in only to be sent to the back of the **citizenship** line because a clerk discovered he had filed his application a day early.

And the obstacles are getting worse. The Bureau of **Citizenship** and Immigration Services has a backlog of 6.2 million **citizenship** and other applications. That's up 2.3 million since 2001, partly because agents were reassigned to security checks after 9/11.

Since then, Congress and President Bush boosted the agency's budget by \$80 million a year for five years to reduce the backlog, but the money made only a dent. And today, the government will begin charging immigrants higher fees with the promise of better service. The cost to apply for **citizenship** is rising to \$320 from \$260. Let's hope that applicants start getting their money's worth. After all, they're only trying to do the right and patriotic thing.

Excellent, your Eminence

It took him a bit longer than optimal, but, having studied the issue, Edward Cardinal Egan has come out foursquare in favor of raising New York's pitiful \$5.15-per-hour minimum wage. Even better, he has expressed same in a personal letter to state Senate Majority Leader Joe Bruno. The state's 700,000 below-poverty-level workers may now have a prayer of being paid a living wage.

Bruno has blocked raising the minimum while insisting he supports an increase. It's just that he believes Congress should act nationally. Even so, there is a flicker of hope that Bruno might relent if Congress fails to act before the Legislature recesses June 22.

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Egan's considerable influence in matters of social conscience might fan that flicker into a flame. No one can live on \$5.15 per hour. And all that's at stake here is raising the wage to \$7.10 by 2006, as proposed in legislation already passed by the Assembly.

New Yorkers who forgo welfare because they have a strong work ethic shouldn't be punished. These individuals are not asking much. They have been waiting a long time for some respect. What say, Joe?

Higher impact?

ABC's "Nightline" will expand by 10 minutes tonight so Ted Koppel can read the names of all U.S. soldiers who have died in Iraq, not just those killed in action, as initially announced. The network came to its senses on that point, at least. Now, viewers will experience the show's "impact," as Koppel is fond of saying. Is it an exercise in condescension, an anti-war statement or an inspiring tribute? Sinclair Broadcasting, which owns eight ABC affiliates, refuses to air the program because it "appears to be motivated by a political agenda designed to undermine the efforts of the United States in Iraq." You be the judge.

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