Take a lesson from the Irish-Americans

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Body

Fourth Street is cleaned up after the snows, ready for the Irish-American celebration along the St. Patrick's Day parade route today. In 2006, the ritual embrace of a particular ethnic identity so important to St. Paul's identity arrives at a learning moment. Up the hill from parading Irish families and the call of the pipes, an immigrant backlash is whipping around the state Capitol.

Many of the Irish came to America in flight from starvation and repressions at home only to find fierce prejudices that sometimes ***took*** generations to conquer. Think today not just about Irish-American identity, but about the cycles of Minnesota's immigrant assimilations. Let history guide us.

At the peak of Irish immigration in 1890, Irish-born Minnesotans constituted 6 percent of the population. Now, when some perceive an immigration crush in Minnesota, the total foreign-born population from all places is about 6 percent. But perception can trump reality. Largely because the federal government has been unable to craft rational immigration reform, there is pressure in state and local communities to "do something."

There are "illegal immigrants" in increasing numbers. And beginning in the 1970s, Minnesota has become home to waves of immigrants who enter the country legally. From Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War. From Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war in the Balkans. From Somalia and elsewhere in Africa's dissolving states. From Mexico and countries to its south.

There is a strong undercurrent — again — about class as well as race that has entered the political process here. I am an optimist about the eventual outcome of the struggle between inclusion and exclusion of would-be newcomers. History is on my side.

As with the Irish, the stories of today's newcomers are familiar to an array of Americans whose ancestors assimilated but didn't necessarily melt into an unhyphenated concept of identity. We can think of ourselves as both different from others and part of a whole. Or we can think of ourselves as just plain American. Ideally, the choice of any ethnic identity should be free for all of us.

I am, for instance, free to identify myself as a 10th-generation Anglo-Welsh-American with a tad of Irish and French ancestry by way of England and to think about my folks getting here before immigration laws. It's a good bet that if the Indians had been prescient and powerful enough to pass laws regulating immigration from northern Europe, there would be few 10th-generation Americans who fled what James Madison later described as Europe's bloody wars of sectarianism or who sought the economic opportunity that immigrants today still seek.

Since the great waves of immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this country has scrambled periodically to sort out its future by dealing with rapid, dramatic social change fed by immigration. But among people who came, commonalities play out for the success of the foreign born. Three keys for upward mobility meander through the voyages from immigrant to assimilation: economic power, nurturing social surroundings and political

clout. It holds just as true now, when we are experiencing a high wave of immigration, as it was when the first big waves of voluntary immigrants came.

In our communities, it has proved true over two generations for Hmong-Americans, who are now putting down deep roots. The first Hmong elected to office in America won a seat on the St. Paul School Board. Hmong-American lawmakers now sit in the very Legislature where immigration issues are on the table. The processes of making a way in America are starting to advance among recent African immigrants. It proved out similarly for the now long-established Mexican-American community in the Twin Cities that now has a burgeoning "second wave."

Upward mobility requires the three key gains. But political power has made all the difference. History, again, tells us that when immigrant groups are of sufficient size, their numbers make them important for political organizers. To the extent that continues now in Minnesota, there should be routes to reason again.

History tells us political clout levels the field. This happened in the last century for the Irish in America, most famously back East in New York and Boston, but certainly here, too.

Ask the ***Irish-Americans*** who today will ***take*** the St. Pat's celebratory march by City Hall, where Mayor Chris Coleman presides.

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