



THE IRRELEVANCY OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION MOVEMENTS

Posted on January 11, 2013 by Cyrus Mehta

America has been founded on the noble notion of welcoming immigrants. Even the American [Declaration of Independence](#) cites this as one of the failings of England's monarch King George III, and thus a justification for the revolution: "He has endeavored to prevent the Population of these States; for the purpose obstructing the Laws of Naturalization of Foreigners, refusing to pass others to encourage their migration hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands." George Washington loftily viewed the United States as "an asylum to the oppressed and the needy of the earth." Yet, there has always been an historical ambivalence towards immigrants. After each group of immigrants settled in the new country, they pulled up the draw bridge and felt that newcomers would not be as worthy as them. Thus, anti-immigration movements have always existed throughout the nation's history and [continue to exist today through groups such as Federation of American Immigration Reform, Center for Immigrant Studies and NumbersUSA](#). Individual anti-immigration leaders such as [Kris Kobach](#), the architect of the Arizona and other restrictive immigration state laws, have also existed from time immemorial. This is the bad news. Anti-immigration groups and leaders will continue to exist.

The good news, however, judging from history, is that each anti-immigration group or movement has never survived for too long. They soon became irrelevant while the inexorable flow of immigrants into the United States has continued and continues even today. America's greatness has been the triumph of immigrants who have gone on to benefit the country over the forces that have opposed them.

The [Staff Report of the Select Commission On Immigration And Refugee Policy](#),

[US Immigration Policy And The National Interest \(1981\)](#), provides a vivid glimpse of the anti-immigration movements from the past. I draw liberally from this report to make my point. Between 1830 and 1860, when there was virtually unrestricted immigration, 4.5 million immigrants arrived into the United States. Amongst them were Irish and Germans who were Catholic, and there was an over simplified view that Catholics would never be good citizens as they were beholden to the Pope and subject to the orders from the church. Samuel Morse, well known as the inventor of the telegraph and Morse code, was also a nutty xenophobe, who warned:

How is it possible that foreign turbulence imported by shiploads, that riot and ignorance in hundreds of thousands of human priest-controlled machines should suddenly be thrown into our society and not produce turbulence and excess? Can one throw mud into pure water and not disturb its clearness?

This is the time when political parties such as the [Know Nothing](#) movement emerged with the objective of preventing foreigners from participating in national affairs. One of the pamphlets of the Know Nothing party warned:

It is notorious that the grossest frauds have been practiced on our naturalization laws, and that thousands and tens of thousands have every year deposited votes in the ballot box, who could not only not read them, and knew nothing of the nature of the business in which they were engaged, but who had not been six months in the country, and, in many cases, hardly six days.

Yet, immigrants kept on marching into the US. After the Civil War, the demand for labor increased and about 2.5 million Europeans came each decade from 1860-1880. During the 1880s, the number doubled to 5.25 million and another 16 million immigrants entered over the next quarter century. The Germans and Irish were by now assimilated, and the Know Nothing party had disappeared, but newer immigrants became the scapegoats as they appeared more foreign than the older immigrants. Jews and Italians became the targets of accusations that they could never become 100 percent Americans. A leading sociologist of his time [Edward Ross](#) stated that Jews were “the polar opposite of our pioneer breed. Undersized and weak muscled, they shun bodily activity and are exceedingly sensitive to pain.” Regarding Italians, Ross noted that they “possess

a distressing frequency of low foreheads, open mouths, weak chins, poor features, skewed faces, small or knobby crania and backless heads." Towards the end of his life, Ross moved away from these views.

Hardworking Chinese immigrants were also accused of never being able to assimilate. Indeed, similar to Arizona today leading the anti-immigrant movement against the influx of Mexicans in recent years; in 1876, a California State Senate Committee described the Chinese as follows:

They fail to comprehend our system of government; they perform no duties of citizenship..They do not comprehend or appreciate our social ideas...The great mass of the Chinese...are not amenable to our laws...They do not recognize the sanctity of an oath..

In 1907, when the flow of immigrants reached a high water mark, Congress appointed the Dillingham Commission, which premised its work on racist theories of superior and inferior people, and that the newer immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were not capable of becoming successful immigrants. The Dillingham Commission concluded, somewhat similar to the rationale for the existence of today's anti-immigrant organizations (although without the blatant racist overtones that cannot be expressed in a more politically correct era):

- 20th century immigration differed markedly from earlier movements of people to the United States;
- The new immigration was dominated by the so-called inferior peoples – those who were physically, mentally and linguistically different, and therefore, less desirable than either native-born or early immigrant groups; and
- Because of the inferiority of these people, the United States no longer benefited from a liberal immigration admissions policy and should, therefore, impose new restrictions on entry.

The anti-immigration movements and commissions from the 19th and early 20th centuries have been completely discredited, and reading some of their diatribe against the immigrants from those days makes one hold one's nose. 2013 promises to herald immigration reform. After the reelection of President Obama in 2012 based on support from the burgeoning Latino population and

other minorities, it has dawned upon even some [opponents of immigration about the need to reform the broken immigration system](#) thus blunting some of the rhetoric of the anti-immigration groups. As our elected representatives go on with their deliberations to propose reform legislation, they will continue to be pressured by today's KnowNothings with their false view that today's immigrants cannot assimilate and will undermine America. If history is any guide, be sure that today's anti-immigration groups, along with their views on immigration, will likely become irrelevant as their counterparts from yesteryears. A group that exists solely to hate, fear, suspect and create negative attitudes about certain people cannot last for too long. Indeed, it is the views of those who stood up against the anti-immigration forces that have held up through the passage of time, and will continue to remain more forceful and triumphant. In conclusion, [Lincoln's letter to Joshua Speed in 1855](#) when he was wrongly accused of being a member of the Know Nothing party is worth noting:

I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we begin by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty-to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.