

IMMIGRANTS; Intolerance Drives License Law Repeal; California benefits from illegal workers' labor. Why deny them use of a car?_

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California's irrational relationship with its undocumented immigrants was exposed once again when the Legislature recently flip-flopped on a law that would have allowed them to obtain driver's licenses. In September, Gov. Gray Davis signed a bill granting them the right to get licenses; then, two months later, with new Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger threatening to support an initiative campaign to repeal the law, legislators voted to kill it.

As with the passage of Proposition 187 in 1994, which would have denied health, education and other public services to undocumented immigrants had the courts not overturned it, the circumstances behind the repeal of the driver's license law revealed the ugly and intolerant face of a large segment of California society.

Opponents of the law said its security provisions weren't strong enough to prevent a potential terrorist from obtaining legal identification. But many police departments and some cities pointed out that if undocumented immigrants were issued official identification of some kind, it would be easier to keep track of them, thus bolstering security.

The heart of the controversy involved another issue. Many Californians believed the driver's license law rewarded illegal behavior. They didn't want the state giving a stamp of approval to people who had entered the country illegally and who remain here illegally. But, in a way, that's what we all do every day when we tacitly accept the fruits of illegal-immigrant labor.

We don't stop to think about the legal status of the men and women who pick our strawberries, paint our houses, park our cars or clean our toilets.

No one denies that these immigrants are in violation of the law. But the other side of the story is that they came here to work in jobs that Americans won't take because the wages are too low. Undocumented immigrants have played -- and continue to play -- a vital role in the development of California's economy and society.

One important example: Immigrants help raise our children. The nanny, once a member of only the most privileged households, has become a fixture in many middle-class homes in California. Undocumented nannies enable average Americans to be parents and professionals at the same time, to work outside the house and know that their children are being cared for.

Are these the women we want to keep from driving legally?

As long as California's economy and society demand a cheap labor force, immigrants will keep coming. At the same time, Californians treat immigration as a kind of cheap pinata, cynically bashing it every time undocumented workers are offered a benefit.

If we don't question the immigration status of someone employed in a low-paying job that no American citizen wants, why scream if that person applies for a driver's license? In fact, by refusing to grant licenses to undocumented workers, we are guaranteeing that unlicensed -- and therefore uninsured -- drivers are on the roads.

Now that he has delivered on his campaign promise to repeal the driver's license law, maybe Schwarzenegger can turn his attention to fixing the security problems in the repealed law and offer a new bill. Perhaps California, in coordination with foreign governments, could improve the security of the system by which consuls general issue identity cards to immigrants in America. The Department of Motor Vehicles could make use of such identification in issuing driver's licenses.

If the new governor wants a successful term in office, he must reject the temptation to play to the intolerant instincts of some Californians and be a governor to all of the state's residents.

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