

Handout 2.1 - A Native American Perspective on Immigration

Listen to the Native Americans on Immigration

Immigration policy must include the voices, experiences and concerns of America's indigenous people

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SAN FRANCISCO--I lowered my head and shook it from side to side when I saw the television ad.

It started with an image of white people, then it moved on to African Americans, Latinos and finally Asians. As each group was mentioned, people filled the image and their respective population percentage was announced.

As usual, Native Americans were completely excluded.

But we cannot afford to omit the Native American perspective in the immigration debate, and not for the obvious reasons.

Yes, European undocumented immigrants devastated the way of life of Native Americans. First Nation peoples, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, had their lands, dignity and history stolen by the newcomers. One would assume Native Americans know something about the consequences of immigration.

Many of today's immigrants are Indigenous people who are trying to escape starvation. They don't speak Spanish, only their original pre-Hispanic language. Some don't even identify with their country of origin.

To them the chant, "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us" couldn't be any more real.

In Latin American countries, Indigenous people bear the brunt of poverty. Like their North American counterparts, they had their land stolen and they were relegated to second-class status simply because of who they are. As a result, many are uprooting themselves from their ancestral lands to find work in the United States.

First Nations people in the United States are also being affected by immigration policy. Fortunately, they are speaking up about it.

Between Aug. 29 and Oct. 1, Native Americans from the northern and southern borders met at the first Border Summit of the Americas.

They expressed solidarity with immigrants, took a stance against the projected wall between the United States and Mexico and demanded a halt to the militarization of the border and for the United States to respect the sovereignty of Native American nations.

Many people don't know that there are over 20 tribes that live in the border area who are suffering the consequences of the immigration crackdown.

Federal agents violate tribal land without any regard to the rule of law set by treaties. When on tribal lands, agents invade homes at gunpoint, and demand papers.

In addition, the proposed border wall would cross through tribal territory, including sacred burial grounds, also in violation of the treaties. Migrating animals would be drastically affected by the wall as well.

"We are directed under our law to go to the aid of others and not just sit back and watch the devastation," said Mohawk Mark Maracle, representing the Women Title Holders. Maracle added that the proposed border fence would upset nature. "If this fence goes up, this nation will see natural disasters like it has not seen before. It will disrupt the natural order."

Bill Means, a member of the Indian Treaty Council went farther and called the proposed fence another "Berlin Wall" that would violate federal laws such as the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act and American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

The current proposal for a wall, as well as the need for Indigenous people to migrate to the United States, have one thing in common: they result from the continuous disregard and disrespect of Natives since the European colonization.

Policy is never ever drafted with Native people's interests in mind and favors only the interests of the colonizers.

Free trade agreement policies benefit large corporations to the detriment of small and subsistence farmers. In Latin America these farmers are all Indigenous campesinos, people of the fields. Many still live the way their ancestors did prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

Proponents of the wall don't even think about the needs of border tribes, just like the needs of the Indigenous campesinos aren't taken into account in official policymaking.

I know that I have Inca blood in me, and I know how poorly the descendants of the Incas are treated back home. I also know how poorly the descendants of the First Nations of North America are treated here.

Nothing can be done to restore their lands, their dignity or their history. Many traditions have been lost to colonialism. But we still have the capacity to find new solutions that rely on inclusion and respect. A great place to start is by including First Nation people's perspectives and needs in the economic and immigration policy debates.

Marta Donayre is co-founder of Love Sees No Borders and a member of the Leadership Council of the Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition. IMMIGRATION MATTERS regularly features the views of the nation's leading immigrant rights advocates.

http://www.imdiversity.com/villages/native/politics_law/nam_native_immigration_1006.asp