

Pushing Immigration Reform

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 10, 2010 NCR Today

Two members of Congress joined faith leaders on a conference call today in Washington to announce new efforts to build support for comprehensive immigration reform. Congressman Mike Honda of California joined Congresswoman Yvette Clark both addressed the political difficulties of moving the legislation while the country suffers from an unemployment rate that hovers around 10 percent. "It's possible," Clark told the journalists assembled on the call, noting that as in previous years, the difficulties are likely to arise in the Senate.

In 2006, immigration reform was a central issue in several congressional races and pro-immigration candidates won every race. But, with the economic downturn, and a palpably angry electorate, immigration reform may be a tougher sell this year. For example, at last weekend's Tea Party convention in Nashville, former Congressman and full-time racist bigot Tom Tancredo whipped the crowd into a frenzy with his anti-immigrant tirade. In Arizona, Pro-immigration reform Sen. John McCain may have to back off the issue because of the challenge he is facing in the GOP primary from anti-immigration, Tea Party-praising candidate J.D. Hayworth. It is not improbable to think that any Republican, and some Democrats too, who support immigration reform this year can expect an immediate primary challenge from the anti-immigrant fringe.

The religious leaders on the call, which including a rabbi, a Catholic priest and someone from the National Association of Evangelicals, all pointed to the moral weight of their pro-reform arguments. And, the increasing prominence of evangelicals in the reform efforts points to a genuinely new political dynamic: Had George W. Bush enlisted evangelical support for his reform effort in 2006, he might have been able to pass the bill then.

With people nervous about the economy, and a long and sometimes happy American tradition of tuning out one's pastor when he delves into politics, immigration reform is never going to be an easy sell. But, it is an issue on which the divisions do not cut neatly across partisan lines, and President Obama needs a couple of bipartisan achievements in his pocket this year. Of course, there will be a backlash, but my hunch is that those who oppose immigration reform oppose the President already. He is never going to win Tancredo's followers and you can be sure they will be motivated to vote in November. The pastors and preachers should be targeting those congressional districts where Latinos, Asians and other immigrants have strong enough communities to beat back the anti-immigrant fervor. If Latinos and other immigrants are motivated to vote, November might not be the drubbing Democrats and moderate Republicans expect.

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