

Addressing a broken system

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Conventional wisdom suggests that President Obama has too much on his agenda right now to even think about comprehensive immigration reform, let alone propose a plan to make it happen. In fact, there are many smart political analysts who say they wouldn't be surprised if Obama puts off immigration reform until his second term, if there is one.

Well, don't look now but it seems Obama is thinking about immigration reform “and talking about it, as he did last week at a town hall meeting in Orange County, Calif. When asked about immigration by an audience member, Obama reaffirmed his support for comprehensive reform, as opposed to the enforcement-only approach. The president said the United States has to protect its border but also give illegal immigrants already living here a path to earned legalization.

Obama has an innovative argument. He doesn't say that illegal immigrants need to be able to legalize their status despite any negative effects it could have on U.S. workers. Instead, he says illegal immigrants need to be able to legalize their status because it would have a positive effect on U.S. workers. The way the president sees it, as long as immigrants remain undocumented, they can be exploited and paid less by employers in ways that hurt all workers.

The brilliance of this line of reasoning is that, instead of bucking the tide of populist resentment in the midst of an economic crisis, this strategy actually tries to ride it to shore. It counts on the fact that U.S. workers will conclude that it is in their own interests to not provide employers with the alternative of a cheaper workforce.

Obama might be on to something. If the president can somehow alleviate the economic concerns that make many Americans leery of legalizing the undocumented, it would go a long way toward building public support to fix a broken system. Of course, it won't go all the way. The other major anxiety in the immigration debate is cultural, tied to the concern that Latino immigrants, both legal and illegal, are changing the face of America because they're not assimilating fast enough.

It's the thorny side of the immigration issue. But sooner or later, the president is going to have to grab hold of it and convince Americans that multiculturalism is not something to be feared but rather an asset to be embraced. And who better to make that argument than the country's first multicultural president?

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