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Senator Sessions, Straight Up

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There was something bracingly honest about an op-ed article in The Washington Post last week by Senator Jeff Sessions, an Alabama Republican. Under the headline “America Needs to Curb Immigration Flows,” Mr. Sessions, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary’s immigration subcommittee, argued the case for letting in fewer foreigners.

Even hard-liners on the same side of the issue as Mr. Sessions — like Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, Representative Lamar Smith of Texas and Representative Steve King of Iowa — take pains to cloak anti-immigration arguments with benign-sounding words of tolerant welcome. They say they support legal immigration. It’s illegal immigration they oppose.

But here is Mr. Sessions, ditching the usual Republican talking points on immigration, choosing instead to echo an uglier time in our history, when nativists wielded the spurious argument that the more immigrants taken in by America, the worse off America is. He’s advocating for “slowing the pace” of legal immigration, supposedly to increase job opportunities for native-born, low-skilled workers, particularly African-Americans. He equates a wave of immigration from the 1970s to the present with the continuing “contraction” of the middle-class. Admitting too many foreign-born workers, he says, lowers the wages of Americans, and he worries darkly about the effect of so many foreigners on “schools, hospitals and many other community resources.”

The libertarians at the Cato Institute, no bleeding hearts, took the time for a detailed rebuttal, citing basic free-market reasons that the zero-sum argument from Mr. Sessions is off-base. Immigrants lift the economy as new workers and consumers, and they do not strain the welfare safety net. There is not a fixed number of jobs over which immigrants and the native-born grapple. The economy is far more dynamic than that, and a lot of its dynamism comes from immigration.

This is all so obvious — or it used to be — that most mainstream Republicans accepted it. Yet Mr. Sessions accuses the financial and political “elite” of a conspiracy to keep wages down through immigration. He seems to be betting that a revival of 1920s-style closed-borders populism will resonate, at a time when many Americans are fretting about income inequality and shriveled opportunity. Politicians on the left — like Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts; Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York; and Zephyr Teachout, the Fordham law professor who ran a spirited campaign for New York governor — have persuasively argued that corporatist forces are making life difficult for the working woman and man. To excite Democratic voters in her presidential campaign, Hillary Rodham Clinton may have to adopt the same stance, or at least convincingly fake it.

But nowhere in that argument is there a case for yanking America's welcome mat. Mr. Sessions ignores the truth, proved over centuries, that immigration over all is good for the American economy. His tears for low-income Americans fail to impress, given his party's obdurate hostility to policies that help the poor and working class. If he truly wanted to lift them up, he would be better off supporting labor unions and women's rights, higher minimum wages, tougher wage-and-hour enforcement, more access to child-care and reproductive rights. And immigration reform that unleashes the economic power of the nation's shadow unauthorized population and welcomes the newcomers that our society and economy need.

America's long success as an immigration nation is hard to argue against. Unless you never wanted the immigrants here in the first place, which Mr. Sessions now seems willing to admit.