

DAILY NEWS

Insulting a poem, and our heritage

Both advocates and opponents of immigration reform should honor the spirit of Emma Lazarus' words

By: David Kallick, Senior Fellow of the Fiscal Policy Institute

July 14, 2013

Like the Statue of Liberty herself, which reopened last weekend after damage from superstorm Sandy, the poem inscribed at her feet has been taking something of a beating recently.

The words, ascribed by the poet Emma Lazarus to Liberty herself, could be called our national hymn on immigration: “ ‘Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!’ cries she, with silent lips. ‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’ ”

Today, the sentiment behind those words is being contorted in ways that would make Lazarus weep. There is, of course, plenty of controversy around what immigration reform. But can't we at least honor our history as a beacon for immigrants seeking a better life?

“Give me your tired, your poor . . . If there's room after more Ph.D.s,” is the headline from a recent article in TechCrunch, which goes on to explain Congress' “awe-inspiring consensus over its support for high-skilled immigrants.” What we really want today, some say, is not people yearning to be free, but highly skilled people yearning to work temporarily in America.

Sorry, but why the focus on Ph.D.s? And, why the temporary visas? Less well-educated immigrants have made major contributions to the American economy. The majority of immigrant small-business owners in the United States, for example, do not have a college degree — as is also true for U.S.-born small-business owners.

And, if we need people with Ph.D.s, the United States has a great university system to educate them — including many immigrants among their students. Temporary visas for people who already have Ph.D.s sounds like an emergency measure when there is a real shortage in a particular field.

Of course, foreigners with Ph.D.s can be welcomed too — as permanent immigrants who can make their careers here.

“Are the huddled masses yearning to breathe free or to eat free?” asks an article in the National Review rather crudely. The answer, the article claims, is that not only immigrants but very nearly half of all Americans, 49%, live in a household with someone who uses welfare — and then goes on to define “welfare” as virtually any government program.

In that case, even more Americans are welfare users than the 47% that Mitt Romney famously claimed were “dependent on government, who believe they are victims.”

If the Statue of Liberty could talk today, would she really be calling half of the country “makers” and the other half “takers”?

Nearly everyone in this country benefits at some time or another from a government program, from reduced-price school lunch to Social Security. Immigrants are no more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts at the same income level to use most government programs, as a recent study by the Cato Institute shows. And we all pay the taxes that support those programs — yes, even unauthorized immigrants, who pay sales tax, property tax (through rent) and often also payroll and income tax.

Immigration reform would bring tax payments up, while also increasing the cost of some services. More fundamentally, it would bring our systems into alignment: All of us would pay our fair share in taxes, all of us would get the services our programs were designed to deliver and our economy would benefit from all of us having a chance to advance to the highest level of our abilities.

The stakes on immigration reform are high, and the debate is volatile, but that’s no reason to forget our most fundamental values. Republicans in the House of Representatives seem ready to scuttle the hard work of the Senate on immigration reform. Maybe a short field trip to celebrate the re opening of Liberty Island would spur them to reconsider.

Kallick is senior fellow of the Fiscal Policy Institute, where he directs the Immigration Research Initiative.