

Forbes

Does Stephen Moore's Appointment Indicate A Thaw In Heritage's Stance On Immigration Reform?

By Alex Nowrasteh

Talk is the cheapest commodity in Washington D.C. Politicians, pundits, and lobbyists live off rhetoric the way the rest of us live off of oxygen. Because talk is cheap, we have to look for other signs to indicate actual conviction or a shift in position. One such sign is staffing. For instance, if an organization hires a new staff member who has publicly disagreed with it on an issue, that organization may be attempting to shift its position. That might apply to the Heritage Foundation's recent hiring of Stephen Moore and the potential for that organization to shift its immigration policy.

First, a little background on Moore, who has free-market economics credentials that stretch back to the 1980s. He was a fellow at the Cato Institute, a senior economist under Dick Armey's Joint Economic Committee, and was instrumental in creating the FairTax proposal. He founded and was president of the Club for Growth, founded the Free Enterprise Fund, and has been on the editorial board of the *Wall Street Journal* for almost a decade.

Like his pro-market credentials, Moore has major pro-immigration bona fides. He was a research fellow under Julian Simon, the famed economist most well-known for his work showing that people and their creativity are the ultimate economic resource, and that commodity prices trend downward in the long run. Simon was also famous for his work on immigration when he was a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation in the 1980s.

Simon supported the Reagan amnesty bill and debated with population control environmentalists who saw immigration as a source of harm to our planet. After Simon's untimely death, Moore wrote, "The weight of the facts that Simon brought to bear against the doomsayers was simply so overpoweringly compelling that I, like so many others, became a Julian Simon fanatic." That fanaticism – a devotion to economic liberty founded on evidence – clearly colors all of Moore's economic writing.

Heritage recently posted an interview with Moore where he acknowledged differences with Heritage President Jim DeMint and others at the think tank over the issue of immigration. Moore

said, “Our goal will be to develop an immigration policy that’s in the best interest of America, our economy, and allows the United States to get the best and brightest people to come here.”

If Heritage changed its position, it would change back to the way it used to be. That’s because prior to 2007, Heritage was pro-immigration. In a 2006 Heritage study, Tim Kane and Kirk Johnson wrote that “[t]he argument that immigrants harm the American economy should be dismissed out of hand.” That pro-immigration view has since been obscured by a series of fatally flawed and highly criticized Heritage studies by Robert Rector and Jason Richwine, the most recent one in 2013, that argued immigration reform will increase the budget deficit.

When Moore was at the Cato Institute in 1997, he wrote that it is a myth that immigrants increase the budget deficit, and to the extent that immigrants impose a fiscal cost, that cost should be dealt with by welfare restrictions, not immigration restrictions. Cato scholars have since expanded research on how to do that. Moore disapproved of Heritage’s research on immigration’s impact on budget deficits both at Cato and on the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*.

But the Heritage Foundation isn’t the only place in D.C. where the staff is shifting in a more pro-immigration direction. Last December, Speaker John Boehner’s office announced the hiring of Rebecca Tallent, the leading immigration analyst from the pro-immigration Bipartisan Policy Center. Tallent was also the former chief of staff for Senator McCain (R-AZ) where she drafted immigration legislation, and is known as a rational voice on immigration.

Many Republicans in the House of Representatives have been skeptical or hostile toward immigration reform, but those opinions have been shifting slightly, and Tallent joining Boehner’s staff was a serious sign that Republican leadership is committed to reform.

While Speaker Boehner seems committed to immigration reform, it’s still an uphill battle. He needs cooperation from Representative Goodlatte (R-VA) and the House Judiciary Committee. Goodlatte took over the committee from Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), one of the most anti-immigration representatives in the body. Although Goodlatte replaced Smith, some of the anti-immigration reform staff members have remained.

Some of those staffers worked on, or wrote, the most controversial immigration enforcement bills of the last 20 years, such as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 and the Sensenbrenner bill that prompted nationwide protests in opposition. Some of these staffers have worked on the two immigration enforcement bills that went through the committee in 2013: the SAFE Act and the Legal Workforce Act.

Some of the committee staff argue that every new green card issued should be offset by limiting a green card elsewhere – as the SKILLS Act tries to do. On the enforcement side, some argue that there must be a 100 percent enforcement trigger before any legalization can occur. Both positions, freely expressed by committee staff, are intended to frustrate reform efforts. A 100 percent apprehension rate is an impossible goal, meaning that if it were adopted, there would never be any legalization.

After the Senate passed immigration reform in 2013, the House Judiciary Committee passed the SAFE Act, Legal Workforce Act, and two small guest worker bills. There was no legalization bill, reform of low skilled non-agricultural work visas, or increase in green cards. Either Goodlatte is not actually interested in reform, which explains why he hasn't fired anti-immigration reform staffers, or he doesn't know that some staff members on his Committee have staked out anti-immigration positions and aren't budging. Either way, a staff change at the House Judiciary Committee that takes on pro-reform experts would indicate a serious commitment to reform.

Hiring new staff with different opinions allows organizations to subtly shift their opinions without publicly flip-flopping. Instead, new staff spread new ideas and ways for compromise that change previously staid institutions from the inside. Moore's move to the Heritage Foundation and Tallent's move to Boehner's office reflect potential changes, while the staff ossification at House Judiciary preserves a fastness of anti-immigration reform.