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Debating Immigration

by John Derbyshire

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There was a good crowd at New York University Tuesday evening for the **Intelligence Squared** debate. These are full-dress formal disputations on topics of public interest, held roughly once a month through the season, very professionally organized and broadcast on Bloomberg TV and NPR.

Tuesday's topic was "Don't give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," the reference being to **Emma Lazarus's poem** on the Statue of Liberty. Some immigration-restrictionist friends invited me along and I wangled a press pass. (Regular tickets are \$40—this is high-quality debating.)

Arguing for the motion—i.e., that we don't want any more tired, poor, etc.—were ex-Congressman Tom Tancredo of Colorado and Kris Kobach, Kansas Secretary of State and coauthor of Arizona's famous SB 1070 law aimed at illegal immigrants. On the other side were Tamar Jacoby, a veteran campaigner for liberal immigration laws, and San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro.

The audience's temper made itself known right away as the moderator was introducing Kris. When he mentioned SB 1070, several people hissed. That's New York for you: Liberalism Central. Kris took it in good humor; he's fielded much worse.

"A sensible immigration policy would favor high-human-capital populations as being more likely to enrich the USA."

Once underway, the debate worked over some well-trodden ground. None of us who are engaged with the issue heard anything new. Studies were quoted, numbers tossed back and forth: 25 percent of patent applications come from foreign-born persons (Jacoby); immigrant welfare usage is \$140 billion net of taxes paid (Kobach).

If you know the territory it's easy to spot the fudges and evasions employed by the immigration enthusiasts. Take that "25 percent," for example. **Duke University counted up** the patent applications filed by immigrant non-citizens in the years 1998-2006, breaking them out by the applicant's country of citizenship. The top twenty contributing countries were, in order: China (including Taiwan), India, Canada, UK, Germany, France, Russia, Korea, Japan, Australia, Italy, Israel, Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ireland, Greece, and Iran. Not much of an argument there for mass immigration from Mexico and Central America, which is the mass immigration we've actually been getting.

We heard some well-worked but deceptive clichés, too. Under Ms. Jacoby’s amnesty plan, illegals will pay a fine, then get work authorization and “go to the back of the line” for citizenship.

In the first place, being already here, the legalized-illegals will inevitably be ahead of applicants patiently waiting in foreign countries, doing things the legal way.

In the second place, few illegals actually want full citizenship, which brings no real advantage over legal residence. They only want work authorization, which is what Ms. Jacoby just gave them. I have friends (British, Canadian) who have been living in the USA for decades as resident aliens. They see no point in taking up citizenship. All you get are the rights to vote and serve as president.

On the other side of the debate there were things unsaid because they are unsayable—to a considerable degree, unthinkable—under the prevailing taboo structure.

None of his positions, said Tom Tancredo, had anything to do with ethnicity or race. So far as I can judge, he is perfectly sincere about this. However, immigration policy ought to take ethnicity and race into account. For reasons we do not understand but which likely have some intractably biological basis, some human populations possess higher overall levels of human capital than others.

For example, the Great Wave of 1880-1920 included a large cohort of Eastern European Jews, most of them impoverished peasants or peddlers. Within a generation, and in the teeth of much naked anti-Semitism, their children were **storming the Ivy Leagues**. Twentieth-century Mexican immigrants, likewise poor peasants for the most part, have **not much disturbed** the Ivies’ tranquility, **even after four or five generations**.

A sensible immigration policy would favor high-human-capital populations as being more likely to enrich the USA. To speak in those terms, however, grossly violates current taboos (as **Pat Buchanan discovered** 20 years ago), and nobody should expect to hear such things said at a respectable forum such as Intelligence Squared—least of all in New York, where heads would explode upon hearing heresies of such deep turpitude.

Within the limits of what may currently be said aloud, though, this was a lively debate. Both sides were seasoned, well-informed, and punching at their full weight.

The evening’s real star was **John Donovan**, the moderator. If you attend many debate-style events, you know that an incompetent moderator can wreck one. Donovan not only kept the speakers in line, he was ruthlessly authoritative with questioners from the audience.

There’s always a fair sprinkling of cranks, monomaniacs, and pontificators at public debates waiting to squeeze in their tedious word. Donovan was having none of it. He swatted down anyone not asking a plain question strictly on the topic under discussion.

And we won! There were gadgets on our seats where we recorded our view on the topic at beginning and end. The pro vote was 16 percent going in, 35 percent going out. The con vote barely shifted. I’m always a bit suspicious of these things. Surely some people must lie to jack up their side’s figures.

Still, I’ll take even a dubious win on an immigration debate. We’re not likely to see any victories in Congress this decade.