

Immigration Indigestion

by Bob Barr

It is often said that "politics makes strange bedfellows," but it is the immigration debate that is making even stranger bedfellows -- causing otherwise conservative Republican members of Congress to clamor for draconian restrictions on businesses and for greater mandatory use of Social Security numbers.

When word surfaced recently that some banks, such as Bank of America, were allowing individuals to open accounts, apply for credit cards and obtain home mortgages even though they did not possess a Social Security number, it was not Big Government Liberals who rose up in arms to stop "greedy" financial institutions from offering such services. It was Small Government Republicans, like Colorado's Tom Tancredo and Californians Ed Royce and John Doolittle, who waxed indignant that banks engaged in such a free market activity as extending credit to someone who proved creditworthy but did not have a Social Security number.

The reason for this strange behavior by otherwise conservative Republicans? Illegal immigration. From fear that allowing banks to continue engaging in commercial transactions such as extending credit to persons without Social Security numbers encourages illegal immigration, conservative Republicans have introduced legislation prohibiting financial institutions from extending mortgages to anyone who cannot establish their bona fides by producing a valid Social Security number. Some apparently go so far as to consider prohibiting banks from even issuing credit cards to such individuals.

Thus is being writ another chapter in the long and unfortunate march of the Republican Party to the pinnacle of Big Government; a march that figured prominently in the party's 2006 electoral losses but which continues seemingly unabated in the new, 110th Congress.

If such heretofore conservative stalwarts as Tom Tancredo and John Doolittle now champion increased government power to mold private businesses into their preferred image, is there really any hope left for the dwindling camp of Reagan Republicans who sincerely and consistently dislike government power?

There are significant ramifications of this legislation under consideration by members of Congress bent on forcing private financial institutions to do the heavy lifting of combating illegal immigration because government has failed in its responsibility to properly police and monitor our borders.

Where, for example, will the mandates they seek -- forcing businesses to determine if a person is in this country lawfully before extending credit or selling a product for which that person is otherwise eligible -- be next applied? Will a bill be introduced that prohibits automobile dealers from selling a motor vehicle to anyone who cannot produce a valid Social Security card? Will landlords be forced to rent their property only to those

who possess a Social Security card? Would it not make just as much sense for these advocates to require presentation of a Social Security card prior to bedding down for the night at a local Marriott?

Moreover, this same philosophy could be just as consistently applied were Congress to prohibit banks from facilitating other "criminal behavior." Why not, for example, prohibit banks from extending credit to persons who might be in violation of other laws, such as the multifaceted antidrug laws in this country, or whose behavior runs counter to sex-related laws still on the books? Or -- and this might hit too close to home to be championed by lawmakers -- should not the federal government move to stop individuals who violate federal campaign laws from obtaining credit; because, after all, doing so simply encourages further unlawful behavior?

One might also ask these legislators why do they now place such stock in the Holy Grail of the Social Security number, when it once was a bedrock principle of conservatism that the federal government was already requiring use of that identifier far more than necessary or even as allowed by the law establishing the system that bears its name? The fact there are persons lawfully in this country who simply do not have a Social Security account or number, and would be thus severely inconvenienced if not greatly harmed by being unable to engage in financial transactions to which they were otherwise entitled, appears not to bother the legislation's sponsors. Others who are applying for citizenship and who might not yet have a Social Security number would be denied the ability to establish credit history or to purchase a home which is -- or at least used to be considered by conservatives to be -- a prime measure of whether a person will become a productive, law-abiding contributor to his or her community.

The lack of consistency in this latest volley in the immigration debate is obvious; but then again, didn't someone once note that in Washington "consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds?"

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