

## **We Need More Immigrants**

Lecture by Dr. Westy A. Egmont

NECC Social Justice 2020 Lecture

Thank you for the warm welcome. Paul Saint-Amand is the one honored by this lecture series. In the obituary for Tufts University President John DeBiaggio, he is quoted “... the one hope for preserving a democracy is to re-empower our students with a sense of civic duty, where knowledge is not intellectual elitism, but the ability to work for justice and prosperity.” NECC has been graced by a leader who lived this vision and today we are talking about a major social issue that defines our country and one of the many issues important to Paul.

How many of you have an immigrant in your family by adoption, birth, marriage, your grandparents, parents or you? We are a nation renewed by you and your families. Welcome especially to those of you who are Americans by choice.

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The greatness of the world’s largest economy and resilient democracy is hidden in plain sight. We are a nation of immigrants. Our greatness lies not in the dominant narrative of the United States as the result of the Mayflower and pilgrims sharing corn and turkeys with the Wampanoag. We were born of pilgrims and also of voyagers, of explorers and entrepreneurs, of fisherman and missionaries, of migrants across the Baring Straight, up El Camino Real, arriving through the Bay Area’s Angel Island and New York’s Ellis Island. We are the people who risked ‘coffin ships’ from Ireland, steamers from Germany, steerage from the Mediterranean and further migration from the warm sun of Latin America. We came as slaves, indentured servants, asylees and refugees, huddled masses starving, and a people fleeing czars, emperors, dictators, fascists, colonial rulers and collapsing nations. We were abused in transit and abused the natives we encountered ...and yet we arrive in 2020, 330 million strong, a thriving capitalistic enterprise with a government that has survived multiple death blows through assassinations, wars, fierce political battles and impeachments. The United States remains a fragile democracy, a social experiment with many scars, but surviving with the world’s oldest and shortest constitution and with a people who are more vital than all the institutions we have created to serve as instruments of our collective dream We, each of us, regardless of our ancestry, our DNA, our affiliations, our faith, is the phenomena we know as Americans.

I salute our nation and our aspirations.

Today, this nation has reopened a debate on the acceptance of global migrants, newcomers. We were a mere 3.3 million when the United States was born. The first census in 1790 counted 3.9 million. Today we are 100 times that number, 330 million. Have we faltered in our national growth as we expanded our land territory and the economy grew? Was the US less a nation after absorbing the Germans in Pennsylvania and the Scandinavians into the upper Midwest, or the Irish into Boston (nearly doubling the city over just a few years)? The growth of the economy is linked to our population growth. Our population growth is critical and it has grown increasingly dependent on immigrants. As we have moved

from agriculture to the diverse economy of today we have moved to increasing flows of foreign born settlers, laborers, entrepreneurs and investors. In 1790 among the top 10 population centers of the country were Boston and also Salem and Marblehead Massachusetts. Harbor gateways! Today our largest population centers include Los Angeles, Houston and San Antonio and these include immigrant dense cities with LA having 40% foreign born, Houston 28%. And closer to home, the largest city of New England, Boston, has a population of more than 25% foreign born and 50% of its children speak a language other than English at home. 139 nationalities are registered in the Boston Public Schools!

The census teaches us the facts, thriving cities and immigrants go together. The nation has received 30 million immigrants in the last 50 years, a strong reversal of the years of world wars and the Great Depression. 44 million foreign born sustain the US population. Yes, the US national fertility rate is down dramatically to 1.7 children (a huge decline in teen mothers and a sizable shift in age for first children contribute to this shift). 2.1 children per mother is called the replacement rate – just maintaining our population. The nation depends on an immigrant arriving every 44 seconds, about the interval of four native births.

Then, we need the foreign born to sustain our economy. Immigrants are still arriving and in fact, Asians now outnumber Latinos in our profile of arrivals. This Asian dominance is now true for two decades. Equally notable is that today's immigrants have equal educational attainment to the native born, over 30% college educated for both foreign and native born. A critical factor in our shared future is the decline in the total fertility rate and it is our immigrant flow that accounts for all the growth in this Commonwealth and according to Pew Research, immigrants will account for 88% of the US population growth in this generation. However, in 2019 the net number of new immigrants declined by over 200,000 people, a decline of 70%. The Washington Post opines that we face economic stagnation resulting from the lowest growth rate in our nation's history and our aging population. Wage stagnation is where we experience this. Labor growth is the key to economic growth but we have fewer and fewer new workers, be they in the lab or the restaurant.

Both the Washington Post and New York Times expressly tie this rapid decline to the changed policies of the administration.

At a recent meeting of the International Steering Committee of Metropolis, one base line comparison was shared. The US has a over 30,000 fewer international students this year, Canada has an applicant increase of 75%. Australia reported an increase of 15% and New Zealand reports increased enrollment of 26% undergraduate and 63%graduate students. Is this an immigrant story? Indeed. Graduates who remain for Optional Practical Training and with H1B visas are a primary source of high skilled workers, many times the engine of emerging companies. OPT is our largest guestworker program. These students are so valuable that other countries are competing actively for more immigrants through education and some even reducing costs to further attract this talent pool. China has a consulate in the US specifically to recruit graduate students to go to China to feed its growing economy. Yet the US is shutting the door. And business is distraught over the H1b which like the F1 is getting increasingly blocked and delayed by the administration. (STEM 36 mo, others 12 mo vs H1b 3-6 yrs)

Who should be allowed to migrate to the US? Are we just commodities in the labor market? Do we just want to welcome Norwegian engineers? Skills are needed, not just education attainment. While the Red Sox lost Mookie Betts, Price and Cora this year, their replacements are likely to be international. The Sox roster last year had five Venezuelans, two Dominicans, one each from Mexico, Taiwan, Aruba, Hong Kong and this does not include our fellow citizens of Puerto Rico. Skills are needed. And labor. And the community colleges of America are on the front line of educating this future work force.

While we have moved from agriculture centered migration, that need remains sizable. There would literally not be the 500 Ben and Jerry dairy farms in Vermont if it were not for the immigrants who rise by 5 AM and do a last milking at 11 PM. 'Farm News' states clearly that immigrants are the majority of our agriculture industry and more than half of that labor force is undocumented. 'Farm News' takes an active position against building more of the southern wall. In one decade we increased our foreign food importing by 73%. The farm economy was starved by \$3.3 billion due to labor shortages according to the American Farm Bureau. Connecting the dots, we cut off the labor supply, the cost of food goes up, we import more food, we are less food self-sufficient, we expend more fossil fuel to get the food we eat and we weaken the health of the nation with less fresh, healthy, locally grown and diverse foods. And, oddly, we become more dependent on Mexico. This sequence is poor immigration policy (and poor agricultural and regional policy), that is impacting everyone's daily life.

And if dependence on the more than 1 million foreign born workers in agriculture is not enough concern, across our Commonwealth we have a vital health care sector and 27% of all doctors are foreign born. Our nurses are immigrants and we face a severe shortage in home health and nursing home health aids forcing companies like Family Care Extended in Needham to reduce the number of seniors it can serve due to a lack of available staff. Haitians During a recent hospitalization at Beth Israel Deaconess I noted the ethnic mix of the staff. The charge nurse reported that 90 nationalities work on that one floor. Under new national restrictions, both my phlebotomist and my resident physician would not be able to come to the US, let alone every employee attending to the clean healthy environment with soap and water. Immigration policy may well be the determinant of how long you live, based on who will care for you.

We cannot afford a false binary choice: immigrant or native. We need all hands, all skills, all backgrounds to sustain the vibrant nation that sustains us.

We gather at a critical time when immigration is the primary subject of a candidate who seeks to be reelected. I was appointed by Governor Romney for two terms to serve as co-chair of the Governor's Advisory Council so I want to make clear that I believe immigration policy has been and must be a national priority for all in elected office, all parties. We face a decision of a lifetime this fall since the accumulation of anti-immigrant legislation, policies and administrative practices are being made in total opposition to the research findings, the nation's history and the economic consequences. Policy issues are often moral questions!

Today is a lecture on social justice. Our personal stand for immigrants is a hallmark of those committed to values beyond the market place and America's economic dominance. Immigration is a litmus test of

whether we believe the 'other' is as valuable as 'we ourselves.' Our stand is a test of conscience whether the greatness of America is because of our personal sweat or because we are part of a nation built by the diversity that is our immigrant history and demographic reality.

As we meet our nation has used prisons for over 360,000 people a year who simply want to be here, often having followed the laws in seeking entry. We have 50,000 full beds by contract every night in 200 such prisons. Of course this echoes the nations love affair with incarceration, with over two million people incarcerated, mostly heavily those of color without the means to pay off the system with lawyers and bail. We have watched the blurring and deceitful practices that conflate civil offenses that are finable with criminal offenses that warrant restraints. We have been made afraid of the dark skinned newcomer by the same politicians who are silent on white boys with assault rifles.



President Kennedy said "Immigration policy should be generous, should be fair, it should be flexible. With such a policy we can turn to the world and to our own past, with clean hands and a clear conscience." His view would be a welcome alternative to today's rhetoric. We offer the dirty, dangerous, demeaning jobs to those out of status with a natural suspicion that that is just the way we want it...disempowered, surfs, who live in fear and are disposable. At the same time we slam the door on 11 nations, mostly of Black and Arab ethnicity who were denigrated in broad generalizations as threats.

As a generation emerges with more communication but less reliable fact based knowledge, we must know our story, our reality, and speak to it with urgency before greater damage is done.

How do we get to the danger zone? It begins with "othering", then singling out immigrants as criminals. Associating the foreign born with crime rates is an outrageous lie since immigrants in America have a much lower crime rate than our native born. We must decry the lie that immigrants steal the jobs when we see in facts that 50% of the Fortune 500 companies, Americas big employers, were founded by immigrants and that immigrants will fill the voids from writing code at our top tech companies to picking strawberries. We must know that the cost of building a wall comes in the same budget that reduces student loan money, gives less support to education, reduces the federal commitment to our health care and guts environmental protection. We must be the ears of the society that grows deaf to the cries of thousands of children separated from their mothers and torn away from their protective fathers to face prisons (euphemistically called detention centers) that will never be a right place for children to survive and gain the capacity to be good citizens. We must be the eyes who see that tent courts with overwhelmed judged who are made political pawns by the criteria erected to judge their judgement is not justice. We must be the voices that decry Operation Streamline and other similar

mimicry of justice as person after person is paraded into an environment without legal explanation of rights or options and who then often face lock up without the capacity to pay even minimal bonds to get help and plead their case. We must be the generation who pushes Congress to act on real reform and not on building walls, who use the privilege we give to them of comfortable lives in Congress to address the wrongs of a system that has been deemed a failure by the last 10 Administrations but which is changed only to make enforcement a bigger better paying career option. We must speak the truth that the enforcement priority has been an expensive failure, especially without reforming the whole system.

I have met those who have spent 10 years locked up for lack of a \$2000 bond. It is the epitome of injustice where there is no cure, no court, no advocate. We are the advocates.

I have dined with those whose family is torn apart at the border. We need sane and safe processes and stop looking for the nuclear option of destroying families to reduce the flow of those fleeing the highest homicide rates on earth and fleeing failed governments, which we helped fail, by enacting a sane and clear set of procedures that respect human dignity, protect families and pursue justice by practicing human rights.

Washington believes we want walls more than education and health care. Will we speak?

Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has said "Before ICE, we had Immigration and Naturalization Services, but it wasn't until about 1999 that we chose to criminalize immigration at all. And then, once ICE was established, we really kind of militarized that enforcement to a degree that was previously unseen in the United States."

We also need to invest in Latin America, help build economies and judicial systems.

But even all this- raising up our hopes for our nation, drawing a circle in which you and I stand with the pleading, the hopeful, the educated and uneducated, highly skilled and raw labor to be one and the same...all this still needs a voice for the refugee, the world's stateless, those with no home who's future is solely up to our compassion, our love written into humanitarian laws and refugee quotas giving international support of doctors and aid workers in refugee camps and accepting our share. We plummeted from 110,000 with President Obama to a projected under 15,000 this year, while the number reaches a staggering 26 million refugees who are part of 78 million unprotected lives without any government to provide safety or law.

Listen to Warsen Shire and let her into your heart...your conscience...your life agendas.

Well, I think home spat me out, the blackouts and curfews like tongue against loose tooth. God, do you know how difficult it is, to talk about the day your own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags? When I meet others like me I recognise the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces. No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark. I've been carrying the old anthem in my mouth for so long that there's no space for

another song, another tongue or another language. I know a shame that shrouds, totally engulfs. I tore up and ate my own passport in an airport hotel. I'm bloated with language I can't afford to forget.

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They ask me *how did you get here?* Can't you see it on my body? The Libyan desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket. I hope the journey meant more than miles because all of my children are in the water. I thought the sea was safer than the land. I want to make love but my hair smells of war and running and running. I want to lay down, but these countries are like uncles who touch you when you're young and asleep. Look at all these borders, foaming at the mouth with bodies broken and desperate. I'm the colour of hot sun on my face, my mother's remains were never buried. I spent days and nights in the stomach of the truck, I did not come out the same. Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body.

\*(not read)

*I know a few things to be true. I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here. My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing. I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory. I watch the news and my mouth becomes a sink full of blood. The lines, the forms, the people at the desks, the calling cards, the immigration officer, the looks on the street, the cold settling deep into my bones, the English classes at night, the distance I am from home. But Alhamdulillah all of this is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire, or a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails, or fourteen men between my legs, or a gun, or a promise, or a lie, or his name, or his manhood in my mouth.*

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*I hear them say, go home, I hear them say, fucking immigrants, fucking refugees. Are they really this arrogant? Do they not know that stability is like a lover with a sweet mouth upon your body one second and the next you are a tremor lying on the floor covered in rubble and old currency waiting for its return.*

*(read) All I can say is, I was once like you, the apathy, the pity, the ungrateful placement and now my home is the mouth of a shark, now my home is the barrel of a gun. I'll see you on the other side.*

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From: *teaching my mother how to give birth*

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To quote Bill Gates of Microsoft fame: "The U.S. immigration laws are bad - really, really bad. I'd say treatment of immigrants is one of the greatest injustices done in our government's name." To that we add, the test of the character of the nation is not how we treat the Harvard graduates or the NECC graduates. Our national identity is how we treat the least powerful, the most victimized, the silent hopeful who swim to us in the hope they can find safety here, find opportunity, find humanity with room for them to achieve their dreams however great or small, a place to call home.

Martin Luther King Jr. called on us to fight the three evils, the evil of racism, the evil of poverty and the evil of war. He moved a generation and his nation. I implore you to see another evil, the evil within our false nationalism, an evil where too many denounce documented and undocumented immigrants as a hostile alien force threatening our lives. I implore you to climb above self-centered comfort to ask about a world where our country leads in humanitarian concern rather than war, where we fight for people's welfare and rights on all sides of the borders. I implore you to speak, to march, to write, to vote for those who uphold the rights enshrined in our Bill of Rights as not the possession of Americans but as our understanding of the rights of humanity and the rights we pursue for the sake of all people of all religions, ethnicities and nationalities.

We are 330 million people living together. We are 44 million foreign born. That 44 million is a population bigger than the entire population of the Scandinavian countries, bigger than all the population of Canada and more than the entire population of any of 200 countries with fewer than 44 million. We are home to the world, we are built on the backs of those from Africa, we are fed by those from Mexico, we are transported by those from China and our enemies are not in these places but within. We face enemies that will turn us against ourselves, our neighbors, even members of our family.

This country that you have chosen or which you claim by accident of birth is still the world's greatest lottery prize. You won. Good for you. But I ask you to think...

I ask you "What is your America? What is the nation you value and which you will leave to your descendants?"

A nation of justice will secure a more just society for us all.

A nation of law will handle its minorities as it will its majorities and actually uphold law as a good for the protection of us all.

A nation of rights, immigrant rights, human rights, will be a nation that nations follow and will secure for us and our decedents, a world with less hatred, and the adoption of more universal rights for all people everywhere, for all those who wish to live out full lives in land of their ancestors and those who venture to worlds beyond.

What is America?

What is an American?

What will you make of this gift given you?

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