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## Tap dancing around immigration reform



Sharon Woodson-Bryant

By SHARON WOODSON-BRYANT 10.MAY.07  
 While the protestors for immigrant worker's rights were rallying here May 1, the Congressional Black Caucus announced plans to combat anti-immigrant attitudes among blacks.

The Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus are creating a task force to study immigration issues and provide information about the impact of immigration reform on the black and Hispanic communities, according to The Hill.com, a publication for elected officials in Washington.

According to last week's story, the black lawmakers have invited the chairman of the Hispanic Caucus' immigration task force, to speak at one of the groups' weekly meetings about immigration reform. A small task force would then be formed to help the two groups coordinate efforts to pass a reform bill.

It is ironic that this announcement came just one day after the black politicians were criticized for ignoring the fact that illegal immigration hurts African-Americans.

Carol Swain, a Vanderbilt professor of law and political science, found that illegal immigration is hurting African-Americans and the Congressional Black Caucus is not doing enough about it. Swain said the group was ignoring the interests of its constituency by not listing immigration reform as a legislative priority.

In a new book of essays called "Debating Immigration," Swain said that African-Americans are losing more jobs to illegal immigrants than other racial or ethnic groups, yet low-income black workers do not have political input in the debate.

"African-Americans have no strong black voice in Congress on a topic that affects them deeply, given their high unemployment rates and historic struggle to get quality housing, health care, education and other goods and services," she said.

Swain used a study conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center which found high unemployment rates among African-Americans and Hispanics was partially attributed to the large number of low-skilled immigrants. Swain added that lax or non-existent immigration rules help businesses get away with hiring illegal immigrants instead of legal workers. She also found that cuts in governmental programs, like student loans, make it harder for low-income African-American students to train for higher-paying jobs.

Some African-Americans feel threatened by surges of immigrants to the United States because of the immigrants' potential impact on affirmative action. And any parallel between immigrant issues and the black civil rights movement is weak. Most illegal immigrants have willingly left their homelands to seek their fortunes in a more prosperous nation. They were not brought in chains, she wrote.

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But it appears with last week's announcement, the Congressional Black Caucus will be working with Hispanic legislators to pass an immigration reform bill. One reason may be because some members have large numbers of Hispanic constituents in their districts and they don't want to appear to have a conflict of interest.

Will the Ccaucus now takes the lead for an official position on the immigration issue that some believe is hurting African-Americans, I just hope they don't step into something that gets stuck on their shoes.

So far, the national NAACP endorsed allowing illegal immigrants a path to citizenship and Sen. Barack Obama has said he would not support legislation that does not include an earned path to citizenship but a spokesman for the National Urban League said the group had not yet taken a stance on immigration reform.

Some of these black congressional leaders are concerned about the prevalence of anti-immigration attitudes within the black community and the potential impact on immigration reform legislation. A recent survey by the University of Chicago's Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture found that 48 percent of black young adults felt that "the government treats most immigrants better than it treats most black people in this country."

And at least one pressure group, the Coalition for the Future of the American Worker, is trying to capitalize on that sentiment by running full-page advertisements in The Washington Post. The group wants to beef up border security, end illegal immigration and cut legal immigration in half.

The advertisement reads: "Amnesty for illegal workers is not just a slap in the face to black Americans. It's an economic disaster." Willard T. Fair, president of the Urban League of Greater Miami, appears in the ad saying that "to black Americans, amnesty is an immoral seizure of our jobs."

Fair said in the Miami Herald, that he sees illegal immigration and the adverse impact that it has on the political empowerment of African Americans, and the impact it has on the job market. He cites a 2006 National Bureau of Economic Research paper that suggests a "strong correlation between immigration, black wages, black employment rates and black incarceration rates."

But other economists suggested that the numbers don't hold up. And Wade Henderson, president of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, which supports earned citizenship, said the ad preys on fears. "I understand the concerns, but it's wrong on the facts and it's wrong on its reflection of black interest," Henderson said.

But Fair contends black leaders have been reluctant to criticize illegal immigration because immigrants were among the first to embrace black civil rights organizations. He also is worried that unchecked immigration could cost blacks politically — by diluting mostly black congressional districts. The Miami leader predicts that illegal immigration may cause blacks to easily lose six or eight Congressional seats.

However, the ad was criticized by Rep. Arthur Davis, D-Alabama, who said that the mean-spirited faction is not helpful because "one day it is immigrants being attacked and the next week it could be black Americans."

Meanwhile, House and Senate Democrats have said they want to pass an immigration reform bill this year. Will all of our black congressional leaders be on board?

*Sharon Woodson-Bryant is a Wave columnist. She be reached at woodson-bryant@hotmail.com.*

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