



Overcoming misconceptions

Jun 22nd 2010, 17:02 by R.A. | WASHINGTON

ECONOMIC troubles and increasing drug violence have once again returned the issue of immigration to the forefront of American politics. The debate ramped up earlier this year when the state of Arizona passed a draconian policy on immigration enforcement, and the issue has popped up in primary campaigns in recent months. But while the lack of border control and the encroachment of cartel violence into American cities is distressing, the backlash against immigration in general is misplaced, confused, and economically unhelpful. As *The Economist* noted (http://www.economist.com/node/16274535?story_id=16274535) several weeks ago:

The pitfall, though, is that conflating immigration reform and border security may backfire. Two states over in Texas, Rick Perry—also a law-and-order kind of governor—criticised Arizona’s approach. His argument was that law enforcement should focus on criminal aliens. Efforts to crack down on the larger pool of undocumented immigrants could be a distraction.

A distraction and a costly waste of time, given the economic benefit immigrants tend to provide. But these benefits—and the costs of immigration—are often misunderstood. Robert Shapiro, former Undersecretary of the Department of Commerce under President Clinton, recently wrote an [essay \(http://ndn.org/paper/2010/impact-immigration-and-immigration-reform-wages-american-workers\)](http://ndn.org/paper/2010/impact-immigration-and-immigration-reform-wages-american-workers) examining the literature on the economics of immigration and summarising his findings. We asked him to come in and discuss some of the issues he covered:



I particularly appreciated the point that undocumented workers will find it risky to move around the country. Their geographic mobility is therefore limited, which means that costs are concentrated locally. At the same time, upward mobility is curtailed since some opportunities are too risky to pursue, which increases the time illegal immigrants spend in poverty.