

Immigration: What's the problem?

Michel D. Suárez
Professor and Journalist

Things have to be going pretty badly in Spain when surveys confirm that its citizens see immigration as their country's foremost problem, surpassing even issues of terrorism, housing and the cost of living.

They must be so bad when, despite the fact that the government is in the midst of uncertain negotiations with ETA in an attempt to put an end to its terrorist activity; and the constant and incalculable threat of Islamic extremism, Spaniards generally believe that immigrants are their greatest problem.

In fact, it is so bad that the Parliament of the Canary Islands (those beautiful islands where probably half of the population has some relative on the other side of the pond), has refused to pass an initiative against racism. According to the Popular Party (PP) and the governing Canary Island Coalition (CC), this is due to the fact that the Socialists who are promoting the initiative "want to raise a smoke screen to hide their poor management of the immigration issue." For clarity's sake, that is to say that it is more

important for the Popular Party and the Canary Island Coalition to see through the socialist government's smoke screen than to close ranks against racism and xenophobia. Politics sometimes forges the path to solutions. Other times, it just screws them up.

Without a doubt, the image of black Africans stepping off boats has disturbed many. The crisis of the *cayucos* (large, ocean-going canoes that many Africans use to travel to Spain) has caused quite a commotion in national public opinion despite the fact that only 20% of illegal immigration to Spain occurs this way. The flood of Blacks makes some folks uneasy. Let us be clear about this: Although we tell ourselves constantly that we are not racists or xenophobes, but beware - we also must keep Blacks at a distance.

Even in the twenty-first century we have to accept it when an elderly Canarian lady—who surely remembers the mass exodus from her village to the Americas—states on a radio program "there are too many foreigners these days." She does not justify her opinion by referring to real, existing problems but only to her sense that there are too

many of them on the street, riding the buses. May God, himself, come and see if this is not xenophobia. For some, the saying “we are all equal in the eyes of the Lord” seems to not have much validity.

Spain’s problem is with how its government is confronting the issue of illegal immigration. We are all in agreement on that. For obvious reasons, no country can allow uncontrolled immigration such as this, whether by land or by sea. However, politicians are playing with fire not only when they provoke exaggerated alarm in the populace but also when they fail to send a strong message against discrimination for reasons of skin color or nationality. Instead, they practice denial by claiming that “the problem doesn’t exist.”

A recent CIS survey has laid bare their argument. We have a problem and it not precisely with immigration. Rather, it is with the image which said phenomenon creates in the minds of Spain’s citizens. If tomorrow the current or next government could manage to decidedly control illegal immigration; and if not a single person entered Spain illegally without a contract in hand, would Spanish public opinion change in future CIS surveys? Probably not. Yet, that would be the litmus test for the worst kind of closet xenophobes and racists among us. It is one thing to promote order and stability and quite another to shield oneself with them to avoid “contamination.”

Our openness to other cultures, customs and skin colors will be definitive proof that Spain has become part of the First World. On the other hand, the administration should ensure that its infrastructure grows at the same rate as its population, be it native or foreign.

The blame for the failure of some public services, such as health and education



(doubtlessly important factors in the CIS survey results) does not lie specifically with the immigrants. In any case, it is the responsibility of the autonomous communities and the central government to keep them up, to match investment in these services at a rate equal to that of population growth. The fact is that if the growth in population were due to only native Spaniards, the government would face the same, exact limitations. The blame should be attributed directly to the administration for its shortsightedness because the vast majority of illegal immigrants pay taxes and also contribute to the maintenance of these social services.

One cannot say that there are no problems; every process of integration has them. But the process should be fair and generous, at least for the sake of those four million Spaniards who have left their homes in search of a better life, more than half of them with no labor contract in hand.

Michel Damián Suárez is a journalist and professor.

This article was translated by Sara Brooks, Damián Canetti-Ríos, Jaisen Bell and James Perry, students in Professor Kenya C. Dworkin y Méndez’s advanced Spanish-English translation class at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, PA.