

# Latino Fear from Trump's Bluster

President Trump's harsh rhetoric toward undocumented immigrants is spreading fear in immigrant communities, even among people who are in the U.S. legally, a California state senator tells Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

California State Sen. Ben Hueso, whose district borders Mexico, says the panic among Latino immigrants – both documented and undocumented – in reaction to President Trump's deportation threats requires counter-measures, such as an emergency legal fund for people grabbed by immigration authorities and facing deportation.

The Democratic senator cites a surge of fear that goes beyond people who are undocumented, to anyone who may have brown skin or an accent, even if they are citizens or legal residents. I spoke with Hueso in his capital office in Sacramento.

Dennis Bernstein: I ... would like to start by asking you to come in the personal door. I imagine this is hitting you at home, where you live. This is the community you represent. Could you, sort of, put a human face on the response to what's coming out of Washington?

Ben Hueso: Well, first of all, people are afraid. People don't know what's going to come out of Washington. Most people don't know what their rights are under the law. Some people that are of immigrant descent that were even born in this country feel afraid that they are going to be removed. So, it's creating a lot of uncertainty among people in our community, and it's a growing fear.

And I don't think that's the appropriate way to lead a country, lead a community. I was hoping that this administration could come in and unite people around a common goal to improve our country, to create an opportunity for all, to expand our economy. But that doesn't appear to be what's happening.

DB: Is it your experience... is there an upsurge in the kinds of attacks, hate crimes, disrespect for the community? Are there more reports? Is this something you are monitoring?

BH: That definitely happened. There was a huge spike in my community, right after the election. And, mostly in the schools. There were increases in incidences of bullying. There were racially motivated incidents with kids, graffiti, just all these things that we've never seen before ... that appear to be racially motivated.

DB: Racially motivated. Could you say a little bit more about that? ... You represent a community in San Diego.

BH: I represent San Diego and Imperial counties. And we got lots of reports, and we also saw news about people praising the policies of Trump in graffiti. People attacking other people, telling them to go back to Mexico, or go back to China. We heard lots of bad comments around the Muslim community.

And these kids are afraid. We've heard of teams that can no longer... that have kids from within international communities that are afraid to leave the United States to compete. So, there's lots of stories of people not doing the regular things that they would otherwise do: pursuing their dreams, living their lives. Because they're afraid of what might happen as a result of the announcements made by the presidential administration.

DB: Are you concerned that people will be even more hesitant, for instance, if they need emergency support, if they need protection of one sort or another, that they will be less inclined to seek the help they need? Will this create more of, sort of, a "go into hiding" atmosphere?

BH: Generally, if there's ever an incident, we always encourage people to call public safety, to get public safety involved. But if people fear public safety, they're not going to call them. And justice will not ever be seen in instances of rape and crime, beatings, I mean whatever.

Anybody that's out there who happens to be an immigrant or if an immigrant is involved in an altercation and they're afraid that the law now is... instead of seek justice for them, is gonna deport them from the country, they're just not gonna engage the law.

And that's just bad for all of society. That's bad for all of us to live in an unjust society, to have portions of the people of our community, that are contributing productively to our economy and to our society to live in fear, and to live in a condition of hopelessness.

DB: Let's talk about what you're trying to do in the California legislature. This is sort of setting the example for the rest of the country, in a way. But there's a lot of activity taking place. We've been speaking with different legislators and we know that Senator Hueso, you want to create a program, a state program, for legal representation for people who are facing deportation under all kinds of new or expanded programs coming out under Trump... do you want to talk about that?

BH: Absolutely. We've been waiting for immigration reform at the federal level. And the Republicans have held it up. There has been several proposals that have

been great, that are excellent, that congressional delegation of California, and others around the world support, that would lead to meaningful immigration reform to address the problems facing our immigrant community in our country.

Our immigration laws are broken. They don't address the real world needs of today. And a very small fraction of the Republican Party has been holding them up. If they were introduced, Republicans and Democrats would support them. But it's been the leadership at the Republican level that's been preventing that. So it's created lots of problems.

In California, we have 2.8 million [undocumented] people living here, contributing to our economy, going to our schools, paying taxes, that have contributed to our economy, that have helped it grow. It has made California the 6th largest economy of the world. If we saw 2.8 million people leave our state overnight, or even within a month or even within a year, it would cause irreparable harm to our economy.

These immigrants produce over a hundred billion dollars to our economy here in California. They are helping us with our leading industries, our leading job sectors, to keep them healthy. They are a very, very important part of our work force. Imagine 2.8 million people, those 2.8 million immigrants provide the exact GDP [gross domestic product] of the entire state of Oklahoma. That's... imagine removing Oklahoma from the United States, and the economy. Imagine removing two cities the size of San Diego from the California economy. This would cause irreparable harm.

So I have a bill that will provide legal representation to immigrants facing deportation. Why? Because due process requires that people have an understanding of the law, and that they use the tenants of the law to protect themselves as they're facing any kind of legal challenge. If they do not have legal representation their chances of getting due process is drastically, drastically reduced.

We need to uphold the values of our political system, which is equality and justice for all. And this bill attempts to achieve that. We're going to fund legal services through qualified non-profits for those people facing deportation. And hope that they will get a fair, just experience through the court system. Our statistics show that people that have legal representation as they are facing immigration proceedings, have a better chance of staying in the country, than not.

And it's unfortunate that instead of talking about improving healthcare, improving education, here we are, our presidential administration coming after a large part of California's economy. And we're going to fight them on that.

DB: The other side of that, and it's extremely disturbing, is that the private prison industry, in league with the government, has been feeding, leeching off this broken system, this abusive system. And this is sort of what people are facing if, in fact, actions like the one you're taking aren't implemented, expanded. What are your concerns on that front?

BH: Right. I understand that private prisons have a profit motive and the more people that go to prison, the more money they make. And it's not a secret that, in Arizona, they are the leading proponents of SB 1070 that sought to deport largely the immigrants. But I mean, we knew who they were targeting, they were targeting Latinos. And the idea behind that was that they would largely get more people through the prison system.

I have concerns about that. I don't think it's the best way to provide for that service. That's why I always supported making sure that our system is more corrective than punitive. And we're working on that in California, to reduce recidivism, in our state, not to encourage more people to go to prison.

We want to get people if people do their time, and we want to get them back into the community after they have done their time, living productively, getting trained to get a job, and sustaining themselves without having to resort to crime.

But that comes back to living in a society that provides some people hope, and others not. If some people feel they don't have an equal chance at the American Dream, they're going to resort to other practices. They're not going to want to go to school and improve themselves, they're going to resort to crime. And one of our strategies to reduce recidivism is to offer people hope and opportunities to improve themselves, through better education programs, training programs.

And our message in California is... immigrants are part of our strategy for success. We need immigrants to make our society stronger. Immigrants bring different ideas. They bring a diversity that's very important, in making our society more productive, economically. New ideas are always good at improving people's lives, in solving social problems.

Immigrants have made California one of the most prosperous communities in the world, the number one economy of the nation—the sixth largest economy in the world. We're doing something right in California, and I hope this presidential administration will listen to us because we need to replicate this across the country.

People need to be more tolerant. People need to be more accepting of people with differences, and understand that it's a good recipe for making us a much more

successful country. Immigrants have made America. Immigrants have made America strong. And immigrants have made America the strongest economy in the world. We've just got to look at history, and learn from it, and start to understand that hate and divisiveness only causes conflict, loss of productivity. It destroys people's lives. All the things we don't want are made possible by hate.

And we just have to send that message to Washington. Please stay out of our state. Please don't ruin our economy. We're doing fine. We had so many hopes, on working on so many things this year, to improve California's health care system, and our economy, and our education system.

And it just seems that we're going to only be putting our feet in the sand, defending all of our gains against this administration. It just seems that it's counterproductive. And we need Washington to join us in making California more prosperous.

DB: And, I know, you're very strongly in support of the decision by many California cities to become sanctuary.

BH: I'm supportive of cities not using public safety ... to do other than public safety functions, to send a message that the police are there to uphold the law and to fight crime. And if the federal government wants to expand their role, well, we need to hire more police officers, and they need to fund that.

But, it's not a good policy to have people that are trained at one thing, and are good at one thing, to perform a completely different function, and to take away from investigating crimes and upholding the law. It's just not the way our system of government works. It's not the way we fund government, it's not the way we achieve justice for all people in our community. It just does not work. He is ruining a good system.

And that's why we have a department that's trained and entirely focused on handling immigration matters. That's the Department of Homeland Security. If he wants to have the Department of Homeland Security do those functions, he needs to expand their ranks, train people in that area, and have them go patrol the border.

Spending money on building a wall is just a waste of taxpayer dollars. There hasn't been a wall that has ever stopped a single person. People find ways around walls, especially when you can't patrol them. It's a 3,000 mile border that we just don't have enough people in the United States to park them at the border, and to monitor people coming across. Less people are coming across at the border, anyway.

And so, it's just a waste of money. It's foolish. It sends the wrong message internationally about America's values, and what we stand for. And, currently, as we speak, there are countries getting together to start to block this administration's policies. One of them is our friend to the south, Mexico.

It's just a shame that instead of building bridges, we're building walls. And instead of making friends, we're making enemies. And I've always predicted that Republican incoming administrations always seem to cause a war with somebody. And it's something that our country needs less of, these days. We need to make friends around the world, and we need to use our excellent system of government to inspire other people in other countries to become democratic countries. We need to lead by example, not by the barrel of a gun.

DB: You know, Senator Hueso, let me... maybe we can conclude by this. Are you... the communities that you are working with, you know, within the legislature, and that you represent in your communities south of Los Angeles, in San Diego, are you uniting with other causes, interests? Is there sort of a cross pollination? Are you supporting the women? How is that working? Is your community coming together in that regard?

BH: I think the entire California community is coming together. We have the health care community coming out in opposition to the President's threats. We have the immigrant community coming together. We have the business community coming together, afraid of... the trade, the successful trade economy that we've established in California. I can't think of anybody, other than a very small group of people that support him in California, that hasn't thought about uniting. I feel that I have the support of my community.

I was at the women's march. It was incredible to see that level of organization without anyone organizing it. People issued an invitation, and everyone came out. We had 40,000 just in downtown San Diego. It was just unbelievable to be part of that. But we had those three marches throughout California, 250,000 people in L.A. It was just an amazing thing to witness.

And we're getting calls every day. People are concerned. People are asking us to act, to represent California's interest in a very bold way. And we have members that are stepping up. So, I'm not looking forward to any kind of conflict with this administration. We want to work with the presidential administration, and Congress and Senate to move our country in a better direction. And we're just very concerned about what's coming out of there, the rhetoric, the hate, the destruction that could come from that.

So, I want to thank you having me on your show and giving me an opportunity to say a few words. But, we're here. For Californians that need more information,

they are more than welcome to call my office. I know other senators and assembly members of the state are eager to hear from their constituents. So we'd like to hear from everyone about what they feel about this as well.

DB: And, indeed, this is a part of that series of speaking with our legislators. Thank you for taking the time out, very gracious of you. And we appreciate the information.

BH: Thank you, and you have a wonderful day.

**Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.**

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