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Scapegoats, again

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 13, 2009 NCR Today

Economic nervousness blankets the country -- and here in California, that blanket is even thicker. Which can only mean one thing: it's time to demonized undocumented immigrants.

Nationally, there is talk that unemployment will soon pass a crucial psychological marker: ten percent. Well, here on the West Coast -- where we're always ahead of the trends -- we've already jumped passed that to 11.5 percent.

And so here comes a cascades of reports -- the latest in Monday's *Los Angeles Times* about a fresh movement to penalize illegals [1]. This latest push -- organized by political activists from San Diego, just a stone's throw from the Mexican border -- would target the children of undocumenteds. Here's the problem: for decades, and especially during hard times, a certain wing of California politics has tried to find ways to cut off state help to illegal immigrants. But the issue of their U.S.-born children always muddies the waters: Those children are actually American citizens. Deporting their parents, or taking away parental access to schools and training, means dividing families.

A new solution hoping to make its way as a ballot initiative here soon would just "impose new rules for birth certificates," according to the Times. So, if U.S.-born children of undocumenteds were now denied citizenship -- problem solved. Everyone gets kicked back across the border.

Says Barbara Coe, a key supporter quoted by the Times: "Illegals and their children are costing the state billions of dollars. It's invasion by birth canal."

Ms. Coe was also a key player in Proposition 187 -- the anti-immigrant ballot initiative that polarized the electorate in 1994, during the last sharp downturn in the California economy.

The Catholic church here -- especially Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles -- lead opposition to that proposition, and has sided with immigrants' rights in the years since. It is sure to do so again, especially on the heals of Pope Benedict's encyclical on the pitfalls of unbridled economic systems. That document continues to draw strong attention, including Sunday's *New York Times* [2], and today's "Beliefs" column [3] in the *Los Angeles Times*. Church leaders seem to understand that bad times can bring out the worst in good people -- unless someone is there to point out another way.

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[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-illegal-immigration13-2009jul13,0,4982035.story
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