

## Vital Public Policy Requires Vigorous Public Debate

*Avoid clichés like the plague. – William Safire*

One of the great challenges to Public Policy is knowing when and how to change a successful policy, grown obsolete. Very few policies are immortal. Time is a kaleidoscope presenting policy makers with an ever-changing pattern. Yet the clichés from one era often linger in our minds and public dialogue as if they were written in stone. Too often we confuse temporary success with universal wisdom. In my experience almost inevitably today's solutions become tomorrow's problems. Take immigration as an example:

Of course, "we are a nation of immigrants," but immigrants originally settled every nation in the world; this cliché confuses facts with wisdom. It tells nothing about what we want America to *become*. Of course, immigration "has been good for America," but we are no longer an empty continent – we are a crowded country of over 300 million people, with problems of sprawl, pollution, and disappearing open space. When the Statue of Liberty was erected in 1886, there were less than 65 million Americans. What other public policy applicable to the 1880s is still applicable today?

It is said that immigration is important because there are "jobs that Americans won't do." This probably never was true, but this cliché has now become a job-destroying and wage-lowering philosophy where employers use both unskilled and (increasingly) skilled immigrants to hold down wages and obtain cheap labor at the expense of American workers.

One particular below-the-belt cliché suggests that all discussion of immigration is "racist." Yet every immigrant-receiving country in the world (and there are not many that take any immigrants) has not only the right but also the duty to discuss and decide how many immigrants, which immigrants, and by what rules such decisions are to be made and enforced. It would be public policy malpractice not to debate and discuss such an important topic.

Clichés are the enemy of thought. Immigration and demography are too important subjects to be left to shallow thinking and trite sayings. The great physicist Niels Bohr once said "The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, the opposite of a great truth is often another great truth." Of course immigration has been good for America, but mass immigration during the twenty-first century brings America far more liabilities than assets.

*– Richard D. Lamm, LLB, CPA, Former Governor of Colorado, Executive Director, Public Policy Institute, University of Denver*