Mississippi Rejects Immigration Enforcement Bill

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4 A letter in opposition to HB 488 was sent to Mississippi senators March 27 by the Mississippi Sheriff Association and the Mississippi Association of Chiefs of Police, the Mississippi Municipal League, and the Mississippi Association of Supervisors. Soon after another letter opposing the bill was sent to lawmakers by seven agriculture groups and the state chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors. Agriculture groups included the Mississippi Poultry Association, Mississippi Grown Association, Mississippi Pecan Association, Mississippi Nursery and Landscape Association, and the Mississippi Forestry Association. See “Opposition to immigration bill widespread,” The Clarion Ledger, March 27, 2012, at http://www.clarionledger.com/bizpol/2012/03/27/mississippi-state-misses-immigration-bill

5 I also interviewed a young man from Central America about HB 488 who has lived in Mississippi for more than 10 years, is a lay leader at his Gulf Coast Catholic Church, and is undocumented. He said that he and his community know little about what was going on with anti-immigrant legislation in Mississippi, but that most immigrants in Mississippi were aware of how Alabama’s harsh immigrant enforcement bill, HB 56, had impacted immigrants living in that state.


7 See http://www.gallup.com/poll/114022/state-states-importance-religion.aspx


In a remarkable development, a harsh immigration enforcement bill that passed the Mississippi House of Representatives on March 15 with strong support from Governor Phil Bryant and Mississippi Tea Party members died in a Senate Judiciary Committee on April 3, 2012, the last day that action could be taken on any general bills passed by the opposite chamber. Early in the legislative session, Mississippi’s bishops had denounced anti-immigrant legislation, which they argued would threaten the dignity of the human person and negatively impact the progress Mississippi has made in addressing racial injustice. A sign-on letter from evangelical leaders, whose voices had not been heard in prior debates on anti-immigrant legislation, also gained wide support. But in a move that stunned many, Mississippi law enforcement and municipal leaders, including the Mississippi Sheriffs' Association and Mississippi Association of Chiefs of Police, came out strongly against HB 488 in a letter to lawmakers on March 27, calling it an “unfunded state mandate” that could lead to new taxes. Soon after, leaders of agriculture groups, including the influential Mississippi Farm Bureau, sent a letter to lawmakers warning that the bill could hurt Mississippi’s economy. The next day, the Mississippi Economic Council, effectively a statewide Chamber of Commerce, opposed the bill.

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Catholic Social Thought and Restorative Justice

Do's Relative Mobility “Cure” Inequality? Changing the Script: A Starting Point for Reducing Gun Violence

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JESUIT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The Jesuit Social Research Institute works to transform the Gulf South through action research, analysis, education, and advocacy on the core issues of poverty, race, and migration. The Institute is a collaboration of Loyola University New Orleans and the Society of Jesus rooted in the faith that does justice.
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To better understand how Mississippi arrived at this potentially historic juncture in stopping the spread of state-level anti-immigrant legislation, I interviewed individuals who helped to shape the coalition of new voices, as well as faith and civil rights leaders working for immigration justice in Mississippi.

A HOPELESS FEELING

At the beginning of the 2012 Mississippi legislative session, the passage of a strict immigration enforcement bill was considered by many as inevitable. The new governor, Republican Phil Bryant, ran on an anti-immigrant platform, and for the first time since Reconstruction both chambers of the legislature were majority Republican.

Long-time immigrant advocate Mary Townsend with El Pueblo/Seashore Mission told me, “I had no doubt [HB 488] was going to pass. I felt we didn’t have a chance.” Michael Ann Oropeza, Director of Parish Based Ministries at the Diocese of Jackson, admits she sometimes suffered a “hopeless feeling, a feeling of defeat.” For Warner Yoder, the Executive Director of the Public Policy Center of Mississippi, the future in terms of the new Jim Crow…to have a three-race system with Hispanics at the bottom and using deputy sheriffs to harass people and prevent organizing. It was just scary.

LAW ENFORCEMENT PRIME MOTIVATORS

Surprisingly, it was Mississippi law enforcement leaders that jump-started the coalition of new voices against HB 488. Late Wednesday evening, March 14, an amendment giving law officers discretion to offend HB 488. Donna Ebbs, lobbyist for the Mississippi Association of County Sheriffs, told me, “When that amendment took away our discretion, we had to come out full-force against it.” A leader in the agricultural sector, who asked not to be named, believes “law enforcement was one of the prime motivators of getting this going. Up to that point it looked like it was going to pass…” The agricultural community worked diligently hard to build the coalition, but had the law enforcement people not been there first I don’t think we could have built the coalition.” He also noted that “natural and cultural ties between Mississippi and the South were greatly influenced by the negative impact of HB 36 on Alabama’s economy and reputation.”

I asked Robert Bruce Russell, Chief of Police for the city of Ellisville and a vocal leader of the law enforcement coalition, his role in the movement to oppose the bill. He explained, “The city of Ellisville cannot afford to fix a problem the federal government created…I am going to be honest with you. After 20 years of law enforcement people get two things when they go to jail—they get religion and they get sick. We are going to have to pay the bills on that… We start housing this many people we have to pay for it.”

Chief Russell made a compelling moral argument against HB 488 as well. At a press conference inside the capitol on March 28, he told reporters, “It’s going to get to the point to where either you detain a man’s working and trying to provide a better life for his family. Or you detain a dope dealer or somebody with a suspended license or something like that.” In my interview, Chief Russell worried about the impact HB 488 would have on immigrant families: “The ones that are here now are family oriented. What do you do to the children that are born here? Do you throw them in a detention center and let them sit there until something is figured out with the parent?”

DID MISSISSIPPIANS’ FAITH PLAY A ROLE?

As HB 488 was winding its way through the legislature, the annual Gallup poll on religion in American life again found Mississippi to be the most “religious state” in the country, with 85 percent of Mississippi respondents agreeing that religion is an important part of their daily life. I asked what Mississippi leaders thought the role of faith played in the outcome of HB 488.

Chief Russell told me, “It wasn’t about religion, it’s about the all-mighty dollar,” in reference to the section of the bill providing important moral reasons to oppose HB 488. The leader of the agriculture group told me, “I’ll be honest with you, [religious leaders] did help… to shore up groups or legislators who would already be opposed. I don’t think they had much effect on persuading anybody who was otherwise skeptical or supporting.”

Warren Yoder felt that the reinforcement provided by faith leaders was “extremely important. Anytime the church was thinking we were going to lose, so having encouragement to stand up and stick it out was essential.”

Mary Townsend offered this perspective: “The more faith leaders speak up compellingly and present the teachings from Scripture we all hold in common, the more people will see that our eyes will be opened and they will remember that they are called by God to love their neighbor whoever he is…”

CONCLUSION

Without moral arguments provided by faith leaders, including Rep. Jim Evans, D-Delta, who led the Mississippi Black Caucus in opposing the bill, the debate over HB 488 could have easily devolved into a solely economic argument that ignored the humanity and dignity of immigrants. Views are mixed regarding whether Mississippi will face immigration bills in the next legislature. How the Supreme Court rules on Arizona’s SB 1070 will certainly be a factor. Warren Yoder is hopeful, but in 22nd Century is everything happening in Mississippi quickly,” he said. “This is a place to keep an eye on and participate in. Because things are possible that nobody thought possible even four months ago. There are relationships that have been developed. There are possibilities that are being discussed. I frankly have no idea how this is going to work out… But there are heartening potentials.”

For reducing Gun Violence

By Alex Mikulich, Ph.D.

The success of Ceasefire, a version of which is being implemented in New Orleans, is due to the fact that police and local neighborhoods came together, listened to each other, rewrote old scripts, and learned about each other’s mutual interest in reducing violence, which led to gang members giving up their guns and a reduction in violent crime.

There are many more “best practices” to be explored. For starters, Operation Ceasefire shows that the old scripts can be changed and that police and local communities can work together to reduce violence. That is change we can all support.

ENDNOTES


2 Ibid.


4 Ibid. Don’t Shoot, p. 150.

5 Ibid, “Practice Brief.”

6 Ibid. Don’t Shoot, p. 75.


6 Ibid.

7 Loyola University New Orleans


10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.
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