

Immigration reform splits lawmakers, advocates

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Pro-immigration rallies last week across the U.S. raised the stakes. Protesters from Charlotte to Los Angeles rallied for a national policy that allows immigrants already here to remain.

The Congressional Black Caucus hasn't staked out an official position, said chairman Rep. Mel Watt (D-N.C.), who voted against the House immigration bill last year. Charlotte Republican Sue Myrick, a staunch supporter of tougher restrictions, voted for it.

"We're all immigrants or descendants of immigrants at some level," Watt said. "There's no need to over-react and criminalize being in the country illegally."

Illegal immigration is a direct threat to African Americans, insists former Winston-Salem alderman Vernon Robinson. Last month at a Charlotte town hall meeting, Robinson, a congressional candidate, said illegal immigrants are more likely to work for less than minimum wage, which depresses earning power for native-born and naturalized Americans.

"A large number of illegal (immigrants) keep wages down," Robinson said. "When they become the No. 1 minority, that means businesses are going to replace (blacks) with minorities that speak the language of the immigrants."

The Republican-dominated Senate is split on immigration. There have been signs that conservatives are willing to compromise to offer illegals broader opportunities to lawful employment, which President Bush supports. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (D-Tenn.), a potential 2008 presidential candidate, introduced legislation to stiffen border security and

penalties. But Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) has also forwarded a more lenient bill that would allow undocumented immigrants to apply for work visas and move toward citizenship.

Immigration is a hot-button issue in North Carolina. Federal officials estimate there are more than 500,000 illegals in the state, many of whom work in the service industry. The state's economy needs the labor, Dole argues.

"Temporary foreign labor plays an important role in the agriculture and service industries in North Carolina and throughout the country," she said. "I would consider legislation that secures our borders to stop illegal immigration and then create temporary work permits, where people can apply to work in this country for a limited period of time as long as they pay taxes and obey the law."

"We need comprehensive immigration reform that secures our borders, protects Americans and addresses the 11 million undocumented immigrants living here today," said Sen. Democratic Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.). "I hope Sen. Frist will immediately substitute this comprehensive approach for his wrongheaded bill."

Full Senate debate began Tuesday and is expected to last two weeks. A House-Senate committee must reconcile differences between bills version before it can become law.

Watt, a Democrat who serves on the House Judiciary Committee, said making illegal immigration a felony — which is what the House-approved bill does — is wrong.

"It was too draconian and would put too many people in jail just for being in the country whether they broke any laws or not," he said.

Black Americans trail nation

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ence." Jones noted that Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, who presided over the Dred Scott case was a supremely qualified jurist and had served as secretary of treasury in the Andrew Jackson administration.

"Yet, when faced with the fundamental question of whether a one-time slave, Dred Scott, had standing to sue to retain his newly-acquired free status, Justice Taney wrote that black people — slaves — were not persons within the contemplation of the framers of the Constitution and were therefore powerless to sue. Had Chief Justice Taney been imbued with a different scale of values, our national history on race might have been considerably different," Jones writes.

In another landmark case, Plessy v. Ferguson, then-Chief Justice Henry Billings had impeccable legal credentials.

"Justice Brown had served on the Sixth Circuit of Appeals and was the holder of degrees from Harvard and Yale," observed Jones, who retired from the same appeals court "Yet, he lacks the values that sensitized him to understand why the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments had to become part of the Constitution. That responsibility fell to the lone dissenter, John Marshall Harlan, the son of Kentucky slave owners, a graduate of Centre College and Transylvania University. Justice Harlan offered an eloquent prophecy that the court and the nation would regret the doctrine it had imposed on the nation.

"At first glance, Justice Brown's academic and career credentials may have appeared more impressive than Justice Harlan's. But in the final analysis, it was Justice Harlan, with his superior values, who was unquestionably the finer judge. Clearly, if Justice Harlan's dissent had been the majority view, we would not be faced with the continuing struggles over race."

Jones' contribution was one of eight essays included in this year's State of Black America. In addition to the essays, the report presents this year's annual National Urban League Equality Index, a yardstick for measuring progress, and an analysis of African-American

presence on Sunday morning talk shows

The essay on black home ownership contains some stunning revelations

"Between 1994 and 2004, the black homeownership rate rose from 42.3 percent to 49.1 percent, the highest rate in history. Moreover, the Black homeownership rate grew faster than the white homeownership rate," writes Lance Freeman in "Black Homeownership: A Dream No Longer Deferred?" He continues, "Despite these impressive gains, however, the Black homeownership rate in the first decade of the 21st century was only beginning to approach the White homeownership rate of 1900."

NNPA News Service Editor-in-Chief George E. Curry served as editor of this year's State of Black America report and wrote a chapter titled, "Racial Disparities Drive Prison Boom."

He cites a Sentencing Project report: "African-Americans who use drugs are more likely to be arrested than other groups, and then to penetrate more deeply into the criminal justice system. While African-Americans constitute 13 percent of the nation's monthly drug users, they represent 35 percent of those persons arrested for drug crime, 53 percent of drug convictions and 58 percent of those in prison for drug offenses."

Curry wrote that racial disparities grow even wider in states with "three strikes and you're out" mandatory sentencing requirements. California, the nation's most populous state, is a case in point.

Quoting one report, he writes: "Minorities tend to be arrested at higher rates than whites, then the disproportionality increases as they proceed through the system. African Americans constitute 6.5 percent of the state population but 21.7 percent of the felony arrests. Going deeper into the system, they constitute 29.7 percent of the prison population, 35.8 percent of second strikers and 44.7 percent of the third strikers.

"On the other hand, whites constitute 47.1 percent of the population but only 35.7 percent of felony arrests and 28.7 percent of the prison population. Whites constitute 26.1 percent of second strikers and 25.4 percent of third strikers."

Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's

Defense Fund, quoted a German theologian who argued that the test of the morality of a society is how it treats its children.

The U.S. is failing that test, especially in how it treats black babies, she said.

A widely referenced component of the Annual State of Black America is what the organizations call its equality index, measuring the decreasing or increasing gaps between blacks and whites in health, education, economics, social justice and civic engagement.

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