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# The sound of hope

Leader

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[The Guardian](#)

The New Yorker magazine's resident political commentator, Hendrik Hertzberg, coined a controversial phrase this week when he wrote about "the ongoing South Americanisation" of politics in the United States. What Mr Hertzberg had in mind were things such as the Bush administration's fiscal recklessness, the widening wealth gap between rich and poor, the growth of political corruption, the embrace of "dirty war" techniques and, last but not least, the trend to a dynastic presidency. But he could easily have been referring to the striking convergence of the human populations of the Americas, with more than 40 million Latinos now officially living in the United States as well as up to 12 million illegal immigrants, four-fifths of whom are Latinos.

After years of neglect, that issue has now thrust itself to the top of America's domestic political agenda. In Washington, the Congress is locked in dispute about how best to control these numbers while, in cities across the US, Latinos and other migrant minorities have in recent weeks begun to flex their political muscles against these measures through large and impressive protests and rallies. All rich nations in the modern world have to face difficult questions about immigration from poorer regions of the planet and the appropriate response to the cultural mixing that accompanies it. These can be politically tricky issues, whether they occur in Dagenham, Dresden or Detroit, but the universal truth about them is that fair solutions must be found.

In our part of the world, four more western members of the European Union have rightly followed the lead given by Britain, Ireland and Sweden, and have just opened their doors to the celebrated Polish plumber and his fellow workers from the other eastern EU states. Four others are to ease current curbs between now and 2009. Simultaneously America is facing this global phenomenon in its own distinctive way. As a nation of immigrants, the US justifiably prides itself on its capacity to absorb and embrace each new wave of arrivals. But the overwhelming majority of the current wave, legal and illegal, comes from Spanish-

speaking Latin America, thus raising questions not just about US domestic policy, but also about Washington's relations with its southern neighbours, in particular Mexico.

The immediate context of the current American argument is also special. Early in his presidency, George Bush came close to sanctioning an amnesty for illegals. But after 9/11 and the creation of the department of homeland security, the US severely tightened immigration controls (as travellers from this country know to their cost). Anti-terrorist tightening is now focused on America's most porous border, with the House of Representatives supporting moves to erect a security wall between the US and Mexico, and plans to make illegal immigration a federal crime punished by deportation. Those plans have triggered the current protests, including Monday's A Day Without Immigrants boycott. The White House, aware that Latino voters could be decisive in midterm elections in places such as California and Texas, is wisely trying to broker a compromise under which illegals would be fined, but not removed, and put on a path towards citizenship.

Whatever the outcome, these events mark a watershed in modern America's view of itself. Some are already describing this year's protests as the Latino equivalent of the black civil rights movement of the 1960s. That may be premature. But the debate raging in America is part of a necessary process by which the US is struggling to see itself as it really is - one increasingly multicultural nation in a world of such nations, not a divinely ordained exception to which normal rules do not apply. There is a long way to go before America's Latinos are accepted as they should be. But the sound of America's protesters is the sound of hope.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/story/0,,1766104,00.html>