

Mary Giovagnoli: The TT Interview

Published on Thu, Nov 15, 2012

IPC's director, Mary Giovagnoli, was interviewed by Julián Aguilar of The Texas Tribune. Read the interview below to learn more about immigration politics and reform:

Mary Giovagnoli, the director of the American Immigration Council's [Immigration Policy Center](#) [1], was in Austin this week to speak at the University of Texas School of Social Work on immigration politics and what happens after the general election. She took time to talk to the Tribune about what she thinks immigration reform could look like, who will put up the largest hurdles toward a comprehensive solution and what the economic gain will be if reform is passed.

The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

TT: Are we going to have immigration reform at the federal level sometime before the midterm election?

Giovagnoli: Yes. I can't tell you what that's going to look like yet, but I think that something will pass, and we will find ourselves potentially seeing something passed at the Senate level and still having a difficult and tricky time on the House side. But I think if we reach that point where we can't get something very broad, there will probably start to be some compromising and at least some smaller pieces, like the DREAM Act, or some business-related things that will be a down payment for a more expansive package.

TT: So the majority of the pushback for a comprehensive plan will come from the House?

Giovagnoli: Yeah, the makeup is different, and although House leadership has now said we have to do this, what the "this" is is going to be a huge part of the debate. The most likely thing that will make things happen is to hold people completely to this commitment that we have to do something for the 11 million people in the country.

TT: We've heard that the border must first be secured before we have this conversation. How much do you think those two issues go hand in hand?

Giovagnoli: I think that part of the problem is that we're still stuck in language and rhetoric that was current in 2006 and 2007, when we had the last big debate. I think that if we're using the standards of the past, the debate isn't reflecting what's going on now. There needs to be a real reassessment by both parties about what those tradeoffs are. We would argue that if you looked from a practical perspective, the amount of money and time and resources that have been poured into the border is enormous and depending on what criteria you are using to assess security, in terms of apprehensions of undocumented immigrants, the returns continue to rise even as the apprehensions drop. That doesn't mean there aren't real and legitimate questions to ask about what's going on at the border, particularly in terms of drug cartels and other criminal enterprises. But those issues are distinct from what we're doing on immigration, and the mistake of the past has been to always lump all that stuff together, so I am hoping this time around we can avoid that.

TT: If the violence in Mexico calms down after the inauguration of its new president, do you think that will have any direct effect on the conversation?

Giovagnoli: I think any positive that happens on the Mexico side of the border is going to help modify the worries and the conditions that lead people to say "secure the borders" first. And I am not from Texas; I am not pretending to stand in the way of people who say "we need this and we want this." We have worked with a lot of people along the border, from Arizona to Texas, including

the El Paso region who say, "We are not going to be able to have this discussion on immigration if we aren't looking at the real issues like why people come, about how we are using our resources." My fear is that the Washington response is that if you just throw money at the border then that will make it safer. But it's a lot more complicated than that.

TT: What is the economic gain? Some say the undocumented people are draining the system, some say that giving them legal status would be an economic boon. What is it?

Giovagnoli: It is pretty significant. The bottom line is that right now even undocumented immigrants do pay into the system. They pay taxes, they contribute economically in a lot of ways, but we know that they'd be able to contribute even more if we were to create a legal framework. We did a study in 2010 that estimates that the benefit would be about \$1.5 trillion in cumulative gains in the gross domestic product in 10 years if we were to legalize people, so it's a pretty significant number. Right now the focus is on this conversion experience that Republicans are having this conversion that they have to get immigration [reform] to get the Latino vote, and that might sort of make them wake up. But I think the thing that is going to get them there is that having a system that works for everybody and that contributes to the success of the country is something that is going to be an economic boon for everyone, and in the long run that's the story to tell.

TT: Do most immigrants want to become citizens or do they just want a legal status?

Giovagnoli: It's not an either-or for many people. There are a lot of people that want to come here and they want to become citizens, and it is sometimes a very slow process. We have a lot of people that have green cards and want to become citizens but haven't yet. When you ask them why, for some people it's that divided loyalties issue, but for most people it's about the finances and getting themselves to the point where they can take the exam where they can become citizens. What we have seen is more and more people signing up for the citizen test and naturalizing over the years. I think that it's one of those things that becomes a priority when it seems that it could easily be taken away from you.

Published in the The Texas Tribune

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