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Valuing Diversity and Equal Opportunity

Tower of Babel/Tower of Trouble? Review of “One Nation, Many Voices”

Behold, the Archive Cometh!

A new addition to the Affirmative Action Resource Library examines issues arising when local governments (in this case, Brown County, Wisconsin – where the capital, Green Bay is located) pass an English Only resolution. It’s entitled “One Nation, Many Voices” and was produced by Wisconsin Public Television. Excellent production values, but assumes some prior knowledge of the Brown County original resolution mandating that all county business be conducted in English. Your reviewer had no such prior knowledge.

An archive of all the AffirmativeAction Here & Now’s, including the Success Stories and the article about the On-Site Review process, is nearing completion.

The March issue of the Here & Now will have the announcement and the web link to the archive.

Nevertheless, even with no prior knowledge, anyone can appreciate how the immigrant side is given considerable coverage . . . many interviews from a wide swath of the diverse immigrant population of Brown County . . . from native Russians, Hmong, Latino, several different Native American tribes . . . each tell their own story of their trials in this country, their trials learning English and/or their trials preserving a native culture.

The whole political background to the Brown County resolution was utterly bewildering to me. As shown in the video, it aroused a very vocal, strenuous opposition – standing-room-only County Board public meetings filled with angry immigrants . . . the mayor vetoes it; yet, knowing full well the extent, and vociferousness of the opposition, the Board overrides the veto and passes the resolution anyway. Why? The video doesn’t really present an answer. Everyone filmed professes an appreciation for the immigrant populations. One wonders, “Really?”



Time and time again the video raises the question, “Why was the resolution passed?” It’s very obvious from the interviews that it’s no mystery to the immigrants themselves that a proficiency in English would allow them to prosper and provide more meaningfully for their families.

Federal law (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964) prohibits the denying of any citizen meaningful access to benefits and services; therefore, local units of government are obliged to provide language assistance to immigrants unskilled in English. The video suggests some support of English Only resolutions could be

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expressions of resistance to this demand that scarce local tax dollars be used for hiring translators (for instance) and would much prefer the federal government fund such activities.

That's the "on one hand" of the issue; the "on the *other* hand" part that the video tap dances around is that the other (or another) possible reason that English Only resolutions arise is that supporters are simply racists. You can't ignore the obvious but the strength of this video is that it doesn't try to present definitive answers as to why Brown County passed their resolution. Nor is any one side condemned outright. The video was made two years after the resolution was passed. (I googled the resolution to fill myself in on what the whole thing was about.) Board members interviewed on camera freely admit the resolution didn't "do" anything . . . it didn't cost or save the county any money . . . it didn't change anything in how county business is conducted . . . it didn't (in their eyes) hurt or help community relations. They shrug their shoulders when asked about the value of their action.

Giving no answers, "One Nation, Many Voices" allows plenty of room for discussion and debate. In addition, as the various issues are explored, the rather checkered history of the United States' treatment of its immigrants is also examined.

This DVD left this reviewer with the impression that the issue is wildly complex and of pressing importance . . . and that tolerance ought to trump ignorance. In a free society tolerance ought to trump prejudice.

Before I end, remember the title of this review? You may remember the story of the Tower of Babel. The earthlings of that early time all spoke the same language and everybody was pretty pleased about that. However, in the Bigger Scheme of Things, this One Nation, One Language kind of world was unsustainable . . . and it ended. And today we have multiple cultures, multiple languages . . . and is there a lesson for us all in that? I suspect that there is.

If you would like to borrow "One Nation, Many Voices" go to http://ucanr.edu/sites/anrstaff/Diversity/Affirmative_Action/Resources/

Fill in and send the Resource Library Loan Form to me at the address on the form or email it to me: dewwhite@ucanr.edu

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Photo by Christopher Beane

