

TRIBES SHOULD ADOPT INDIGENOUS IMMIGRANTS

By Walter L. Williams 2021

California today is burdened with two regrettable realities. The first reality is that indigenous Californians have still not recovered from a massive population decline in the 19th century. Before the arrival of Spaniards, California had the largest native population of any part of America north of Mexico. But with no immunity to European diseases, massive numbers died. Catholic missionaries rounded up mournful survivors and forced them to do labor building churches and farms overseen by Spanish priests and military troops. Later, when Mexico revolted from Spain, influential leaders finagled the new government to award them land grants in California. These Mexican newcomers forced Native Californians to work as laborers on lands that had formerly belonged to them.

In 1848, after the Mexican-American War, the United States government annexed California and opened its lands for white settlement. Even more lands were taken without payment in 1852, when the U.S. Senate refused to ratify many treaties that had been negotiated by federal officials. During the Gold Rush and throughout the 1850s and 1860s white hunters spread terror by conducting what they called "Indian hunts." Indigenous men, women and children were tracked, cornered, and slaughtered like animals. By 1870, after a century of genocide and land theft by the three colonial governments of Spain, Mexico, and the United States, the number of Native Californians was only 2% of what it had been a century earlier. This population decline of 98% was likely the largest depopulation in the history of the world. They still have not recovered their numbers to the present. Today, Indigenous Californians are less than 1% of the state's population.

The second regrettable reality facing California today is that, since immigration has recently declined, California's population is aging. There are not enough young workers to take care of the rapidly-expanding elderly sector. California's prosperity has depended on constant immigration, which is why President Trump's anti-immigrant policies are so harmful for our economy.

Given these realities, a potential solution for both indigenous depopulation and the need for more immigrants is for tribal governments to assert their authority to bring in indigenous immigrants of their own. A basic right of sovereignty is a government's ability to decide who is a citizen. State and federal officials should not interfere with indigenous tribal governments that wish to assert their right to increase their population by bringing in young immigrants.

Fortunately for us, there is currently a large number of people of indigenous descent, from Mexico, Central America, and South America, who would like to immigrate here due to poverty and violence in their own areas. But rather than bringing in whole families, as U.S. policy does, it's more effective for tribal governments to adopt immigration policies that are rooted in Native American history.

Many tribes, but especially the Iroquois in the 17th century and the Comanche in the 19th century, successfully increased their numbers by adopting older children and adolescents into their societies. Their method was for a family who had suffered the loss of a revered family member to bring in a youth from another tribe or even white and black young people, and have a shaman conduct a ceremony to bring the soul of the departed relative into the body of the new adoptee. Because they genuinely believed that the young adoptee now had the soul of their relative, family members treated the youth with extreme kindness. The result was that, within a short time, the young adoptee felt truly like a fully-accepted member of the family. Such adoptees grew up with a firm loyalty to their new family and their tribe.

Today, California tribes can both replenish their populations while also helping the state's economy by inviting indigenous young people to apply for adoption into their tribe. Many native families in the violent parts of Central America and Mexico would be grateful to see their older children have a chance to escape poverty by being adopted into a native family in California. Tribes would have their choice of the best and brightest youths. Such youths would, once they reach adulthood, likely send money back to their parents as many immigrants do. And because they are brought in just a few years before they will be ready to join the workforce, they will have time to learn English, be educated, and become skilled workers. Thus, the birth family, the tribe, and California as a whole, will greatly benefit. All that is required is for state government to get out of the way and allow tribes to assert their sovereign right to decide who is a citizen of their tribe.