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Commentary

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New York State

Beyond The Dream Act Latino Leaders' Lack of Legislative Imagination at the Moment They Must Think Big

By Angelo Falcón

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 "The Road to Somos," edited by Gerson Borrero*

In light of the extreme discontent with President Obama among Latinos over his latest delay and broken promises in addressing the issue of deportation relief, how New York State approaches immigrant issues from a legislative standpoint has become more important and urgent than ever. It was from that perspective that I tuned in with great interest to [WABC-TV's Tiempo Latino public affairs program last Sunday](#), which featured as its guests State Senators José Peralta of Queens and José Serrano, who represents parts of both the Bronx and Manhattan.



Together, Peralta and Serrano have served over a quarter of a century in elected office and as prominent Democratic legislators in New York I figured that they would be a good barometer to gauge the mood of the Latino political class in regard to Obama's



standing as "Deporter-in-Chief". In many ways, on the national level the Latino community and immigrant advocates now find themselves at a major crossroads, as they come to terms with the limits of their reform efforts and grapple with whether there needs to be a fundamental reassessment of their political strategy. Surely, Peralta and Serrano, two leaders with the power to help shape this discourse, would have some useful things to say on the subject.

However, as the show's host, Joe Torres, probed them on these issues, it became clear that both senators were clueless. Fully captive to the Democratic Party's narrow narrative, they made excuses for the president and blamed the Republicans for everything. Asked if Obama's current problems with Latinos

over his deportation policies would put pressure on New York State to act on immigration issues, they didn't seem to grasp the connection. They also didn't appear to draw any correlation between the current impasse on immigration reform in Congress and the crisis of unaccompanied children at the border. It was almost as if they had undergone some sort of political lobotomy.

As for what they intended to do, the senators focused the conversation on the financial aid portion of the New York DREAM Act, which they expressed confidence the Legislature would finally pass when it returns to session in January. While this portion of the DREAM Act is unquestionably important, the problem with making it the centerpiece of a reform agenda in Albany is that it is too limited and uninspired. Even if it does pass—an outcome that the state's Latino legislators have repeatedly failed to achieve—it would affect a relatively small portion of the state's undocumented residents and not address the needs of the vast majority of this population, most of whom are in far greater need of financial, legal and other assistance.

As Serrano, Peralta and New York's other 17 Latino state legislators prepare for the upcoming session and assemble in Puerto Rico in November for the winter *Somos El Futuro* conference of their Puerto Rican/Hispanic Legislative Task Force, one hopes that they can collectively come up with a legislative agenda that can excite and mobilize the more than 3 million Latinos in the state. New York has the great potential of leading the nation in developing pro-immigrant policies that can help move the needle on the type of reforms needed in our federal system.

Now is the time for Latinos and immigrant advocates to raise the ante with Governor Cuomo and the State Legislature on immigration reform. Let us not settle for a nap when he can have the full dream. With the governor running for reelection, Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. as his campaign co-chair, and Democrats fretting about whether they will control the State Senate, Latino elected officials and community leaders must seize the moment and leverage this confluence of interests to develop an aggressive, comprehensive reform agenda and pressure the governor and the Democratic Party to embrace it.

On the immigration reform issue alone, there is a great need at the state level to go well beyond the DREAM Act. There is, first of all, the intriguing proposal by State Senator Gustavo Rivera to extend a "state citizenship" status to the undocumented, which would provide eligible non-citizens with a number of significant rights and responsibilities, like the ability to vote and hold civil office. In addition to Rivera's bill, there is a great need for other measures that would:

- Provide immigrants access to driver's licenses and state IDs
- Increase resources for the enforcement of labor standards for low-wage immigrant workers, ESL classes, job training, naturalization services and legal services to the undocumented
- Protect immigrant communities by limiting the state's cooperation with the federal Secure Communities program, which enables local police abuse of immigration enforcement
- Enact a farmworkers fair labor practices act that would grant collective bargaining rights to farm laborers and provide for an 8-hour work day for them, along with other basic labor protections
- Ensure that the undocumented have access to healthcare to the

fullest extent permitted under federal law

- Eliminate unnecessary barriers in the way of immigrants receiving professional licenses and certification
- Adopt humane approaches to addressing the influx of unaccompanied minors to New York State

Peralta and Serrano's failure to even bring up any of these myriad reform proposals reveals a serious lack of legislative imagination on their part and exposes a disconnect between and the communities they serve, which is, well, frightening.

Perhaps somewhere along *City & State's* Road to SOMOS they may find some enlightenment. If not, *City & State* may have to change the name of its series to "The Latino Road to Perdition."

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