

IPS Roundtable

“Managing Migration: What can Singapore Learn from the US?”

**by Professor Philip Martin, Department of Agriculture & Resource Economics,
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<http://migration.ucdavis.edu/>

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Professor Philip Martin presented on the issue of managing migration in the United States (US) and the lessons for Singapore. The key areas covered were the US immigration system, the importance of administrative capacity to manage immigration, and the distortion and dependence that could result from long-term reliance on migrant workers. The event was attended by 17 participants from government, academia and the business sector.

Prof Martin noted that the US was a nation of immigrants. In 2008, 1.1 million legal immigrants were admitted; the majority were family migrants who gained entry because they had a relative or family member who was a US citizen or legal immigrant settled in the US. The next largest group were employment-based immigrants, while refugees and diversity immigrants made up the rest. The country further welcomed an estimated 40 million non-immigrants in 2008, while having to contend with several hundred thousand who entered the country illegally. Prof Martin observed that even though the US was a nation of immigrants, most Americans want the government to reduce legal and illegal migration.

On immigration reforms, Prof Martin pointed out that some of these had been knee-jerk reactions. For example, due to the economic boom in the nineties there was an increase in the number of immigrants coming to work in the high-tech industry. Terrorism was another driver of reform. However, with the myriad of legislation, there were questions on the ability to enforce them. Prof Martin opined that while both were equally important in the management of migration, a right balance of legislation for admission and enforcement to prevent illegal migration was required.

There is an elite-popular divide in the current US debate regarding immigration and trade. The elites believed there is a need to attract the best talent from around the world to keep the US competitive in the global economy. However, the popular view is protectionist; most Americans want the government to protect US workers from foreign labour and goods.

Prof Martin noted that there were three areas relevant to Singapore. These included having the necessary administrative capacity to enforce immigration laws, which appears sufficient in Singapore and the US needed to emulate. Nonetheless, he felt that the challenges faced by the US such as striking the right balance between using foreign labour to meet shortfalls and protecting local labour while avoiding distortion and dependence over time were relevant to Singapore. For example, a sector that over relied on foreign labour could persuade local students/workers to shun careers in that sector, as with US science and engineering. Further, the over-reliance on foreign labour might hamper the management of illegal migration between receiving and sending countries which might also give rise to other issues such as rights of migrant workers.

The question and answer session centred on Prof Martin’s presentation, in particular, the loop holes present within the US system. The protection of foreign workers rights and the difficulty of enforcing labour laws were discussed. Lastly, the discussion closed with Prof Martin quoting Adam Smith to reiterate the complexity of managing migration.

Notes taken by Dr Kang Soon Hock, IPS Research Fellow.

