

Marianne Wanamaker: Welcome to "You Might Be Right," a place for civil conversations about tough topics brought to you by the Baker School of Public Policy and Public Affairs at the University of Tennessee with funding support from members of our Producers Circle. To learn more about how you can support our work, visit youmightberight.org.

From controlling the border to dealing with illegal immigrants already in the country, immigration is one of the most divisive and nuanced challenges facing the country today. In this bonus episode, former Tennessee Governors Phil Bredesen and Bill Haslam share their own views on immigration, modeling between themselves the type of civil debate "You Might Be Right" seeks to foster.

Bill Haslam: So Phil, the premise of this podcast doing it together is we'd have a Democrat and Republican. We introduce difficult topics and try to explore both sides. One of the things we really haven't done much is for the two of us to talk about a hard issue.

Phil Bredesen: Wait a minute. You think we should be walking the walk here?

Bill Haslam: We're going to see if it is actually possible. And I think the reality is though, one's a Democrat, Republican, one's a Republican, in lots of things, we have similar viewpoints, in others maybe not so much. But I thought we'd try the topic of immigration to do the best to explain where each of us is coming from, see where there's similarities and where there's differences.

Phil Bredesen: All right.

Bill Haslam: You sound like me when my wife says, hey, I have something that we need to talk about.

Phil Bredesen: We need to talk. That's the most dangerous comment in the world.

Bill Haslam: Okay. Let me start here. I actually think immigration is one of those very difficult issues, but it's actually very solvable. But it's going to require some compromise, which is not popular in today's political world, and it's going to require some living with two different realities that are both true at the same time. So here would be my premise. We want to be a country that has real borders. I think to be a country you have to have real borders that are protected and people just can't come and go as they please, so to speak. Number one.

Number two, we want to, at the very same time, we want to treat everybody as human beings. My description, we want to treat everybody as created in the image of God. And so when people come to our border, we can't just treat them as human garbage of some form. Now I say, okay, now let's come up with a policy that reflects both of those things. We have a real border, and yet we're treating people as human beings when they approach our border. Doing those both at the same time is really difficult.

Phil Bredesen: All right. Well, I guess a couple things to start out with. First of all, I think we have to recognize the extent to which this issue really has been weaponized by both sides.

Bill Haslam: Totally.

Phil Bredesen: That it's something that, if you could turn the clock back 25 years, people had a much less ideological view of the issue. And then second of all, I think there are some very different issues that are lumped under the term immigration. Everything from what should we do about college graduates from China versus what should we do about refugees from Nicaragua? I mean, they're different questions. I think the biggest one in front of us is that we have a large population of illegal immigrants, and we have actively encouraged that over the course of the past 25 years. You can't build a building in the U.S. anymore, it seems, without that.

And to now tell all these people who came here for jobs and who in many cases have blameless, I mean, have American lives where they've committed themselves to the country, that somehow they're not welcome and need to go back home to wherever they are and take their kids with them who don't even speak any language besides English. I mean, that seems to me un-Christian, and so I think the issue is a good place to start is with the problem of what do you do with very large populations you have that is humane and sensitive? I agree with you that we need to control our borders and we can have a discussion about where should immigrants come from and what qualifications should they have and so on. But without solving the problem of people who are already here and the DACA kids and some of those people, I think we'll never make any progress.

Bill Haslam: Fair point. But I guess I would argue I'd take the other approach. I think there's a lot of people that aren't going to have that discussion about the people that are already here until we do something to protect the border. I mean, I just know enough folks on my Republican side that that's just become a mantra. Until we protect our border, I don't want to talk about anything else. I've actually—

Phil Bredesen: What do you see as protecting the border? I mean, we have this enormous, unguarded border with Mexico.

Bill Haslam: Yeah, I do remember former President Bush, when people started talking about building the wall, he said, go ahead and build the wall and then you're going to have ladder salesmen in Mexico. They're going to have a banner year. Because there's always going to be a way to get around it, to get over it, et cetera. But I think what we have to do is have a serious approach about, like I said, the whole idea, the Trumpian idea, "If we build the wall, it'll solve the problem." I don't believe that. But I think if we think seriously about using technology, physical restrictions and manpower in the right ways and show we really are serious about not just letting people come into our country when they want to without going through a process, I think we can start to have a lot less porous border. And I think it would make, again, a lot of folks on my side feel better about, okay, now what do we do about the people already in the country?

Phil Bredeesen: And I mean, I think one of the things that would help that... I mean, I agree with controlling the borders, I just sort of have a problem with the, I think some of the kind of what I think I was inhumane approaches to doing it, but I mean having a sensible way in which people can get work visas for agricultural work and some of those kinds of things, I mean, that would do more about controlling the border. I think there's lots of people who want to work on farms in California and come here for six months and happily go home, if there were a legal way to do all that kind of stuff. To me, that would be a more effective way of managing the border than radar devices every 50 meters along the Rio Grande.

Bill Haslam: So you're saying we're kind of in a chicken and egg and maybe the question isn't so much make the border secure as it is, give people legal legitimate ways to get in the country, whether it be a path to citizenship or temporary visas that, if you take away the demand side, if you will, for immigration, that we won't have so many people trying to get in the country the wrong way.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I agree that the border ought to be controlled, but I think it ought to be done in a humane way. I just think that a technological solution without dealing with the issue of we have farms who need agricultural workers, we have construction companies who need workers to do things like this, and you have eager workers on the other side of the border, we ought to be able to solve that problem in a way that reduced that kind of demand.

Bill Haslam: I hundred percent agree with we need to have a humane approach to, like I said, that's the two kind of starting foundations for me are you got to have a border that's a real border and we want to treat people as real people. I think the concern is, thankfully, due to the kind of country we are, we're always going to be a magnet. And I think if you let everybody come, we're a country of I think 330 million people now. The estimates are if we let everybody come here who wants to come here, we would double in size, which nobody, I think thinks is, "Oh, well, that's a really good idea." So given the fact that there are so many economies, particularly in our part of the world that aren't doing well, that if I was the father of two young children, I'd say, "This is not where I want my kids to grow up. I'm going to do everything I can to get them to America." I don't know how, if the demand is way more than what we can handle, I'm not certain how we do that in a way that's manageable.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I mean, I certainly think— Look, if I were the father of a family in very difficult circumstances, Nicaragua or something, same, I probably tried to figure out how to get them to America.

Bill Haslam: Same.

Phil Bredesen: I used to be with a hospital company that had a hospital in El Paso, and the maternity department was incredibly busy because all sorts of people at that time would simply come across the border to have babies, have an American passport and they'd go back to Mexico. But the kids had an option to be a citizen and they had that option. I do think that compassionate stuff is wonderful to make it whole and complete and everything, but it's probably overdone.

I mean, there are lots of people in the world who are in very difficult circumstances in their countries, and I don't think it's in our interest to open the board to everybody who has a compassionate need for a different thing. But I think we can also say, we agree. We set, we're going to have 50,000 or 500,000 or 2 million or whatever annually of people in these categories and have a way to enforce it. I don't have a problem with that notion. That's probably not the official Democratic position.

Bill Haslam: So I would start with that. First of all, as a country, our birth rate, we're not replacing ourselves. So if we totally cut the borders off and our current birth rate, which is declining, we're about to be where Europe is, which is I think a number that's not going to come close to replacing ourselves. If we totally close the borders, we would find ourselves a shrinking and diminishing country, which I don't think anybody, if you project that out, thinks that would be healthy. The flip side is, like I said, if you let everybody come that wants to, I don't think we want to be a country of 650 million either. So to me, it cries out for a thoughtful, legislative solution. Unfortunately, I don't think any of us feel like, "Oh yeah, Congress is going to be able to come up with a nuanced approach to immigration that involves compromise from both sides."

Phil Bredesen: Well, let me ask you. There's some number, 10 million, of illegal immigrants currently living here, many of whom have been here 20 or 30 years and this kind of stuff. What do you want to do about them?

Bill Haslam: So I'll be honest, I don't have a great answer. It's a little bit, when we had the gun discussion, one of the first questions you brought up was, "Well, we can talk about what's going to be legal gun sales, but we have a whole lot of guns out there right now. What are we going to do about those?" And I don't have— I mean, at the end of the day, it's hard for me to envision something where we're going to pack up people and tell them who've been living here for X number of years, you need to leave and go home. That's probably not where I would land. And again, I'm not sure if that's the official position in my party either, but I just can't see a scenario where we—

Phil Bredesen: Well, maybe there's hope if most of us are going to abandon the official position.

Bill Haslam: Again, I don't see that. I just can't see us doing that as a country.

Phil Bredesen: Right. Well, I think particularly because I think we as a country have been complicit in their being here, right? I mean, we've turned— I remember vividly when I was mayor, two things. One, there was an issue of sometimes you arrest somebody in the police department who you find is an illegal immigrant. And I started out saying, well, okay, we'll give them to the federal authority. We called ICE and they wanted nothing to do with any of those people. Just don't send them here. And then second of all, when we built the arena, there clearly were some illegal immigrants were working in there, and occasionally there was a raid and it was like something out of the '20s in a speakeasy, which is somebody would tell them the raid was coming, everybody would disappear for a day. They'd come in and raid the thing and so on and then go away with that one poor person in tow that didn't get the message.

Bill Haslam: Like a Humphrey Bogart gambling. I'm shocked.

Phil Bredesen: Yeah, you've kind of a shock. The next day everybody would be back and work would continue on the project. And when we're complicit at every level of that level, I think we got some obligation to these people to provide them a path to citizenship. And I feel particularly strongly about the young kids. I mean, to send some young kid back to a country, they don't even speak the language. I mean, that's obscene.

Bill Haslam: Again as a country. I can't see us doing that. But I guess I'd come back to, I do think for us to— I'm a little pessimistic that given where we are politically, that Congress can debate this out and make the kind of compromises that we've just said are going to be necessary. But I do think the starting point is going to have to be saying, we really are going to work harder to protect our border and realizing we're not going to have a perfect solution, but we can do way better than we're doing now.

Phil Bredesen: I mean, I've often thought that the way to protect the border, and again, I'm in complete agreement with the notion we should be able to decide who comes into the country and who doesn't. And if we decide we want 50,000 college graduates, we have a way to make that happen. But I think probably the way you do that has got to be outside of the sort of border barbed wire in terms of how do you document somebody who's coming to work and those things. Because I don't think, I can't tell you off the top of my head what the length of the border is of Mexico, but I bet it's 1500 miles.

Bill Haslam: It's a bunch.

Phil Bredesen: It's a lot. And a lot of it's desert and open territory and this kind of thing. I mean, I think it's almost impossible to police that in the way that you'd really like to, but I think there's lots of ways you can reach in and make it difficult or impossible for somebody to get a job. I mean, you can increase penalties for people who knowingly employ people who don't have documentation. I think the federal government has not really stepped up to their responsibility here to help businesses with this problem.

Bill Haslam: So let me ask you a question that I don't know the answer to. I don't know my own answer, so I'll ask you so I don't have to answer it first. I think for the foreseeable future, we're going to have a situation where more people want to come to our country than we probably can or even or should take in. So how do we monitor that? How do we decide out of the or 200 million people that come in the X million that A, how do we decide how many, and B, how do we decide who's going to get in?

Phil Bredeesen: Well, those I think are inherently political discussions. I think for example, the large numbers of foreign students who come here, they get college degrees in American colleges and a great deal of knowledge. Why we force them to go back to their country, I don't understand for a moment.

Bill Haslam: Couldn't agree. When we need that.

Phil Bredeesen: When we need that expertise and so on. But I think it's a political thing and it involves compromises. But we say, look, we're going to do a hundred thousand visas for this, and we have a program for temporary agricultural and construction work for people who come here that's got some rules around it is the way to do it. But I absolutely think it's okay to say, we're going to have this many of this kind of person come in the country, and then we can have a debate about, well, how much of it should be compassionate and how much of it should be in our interest because it's highly educated and so on.

Bill Haslam: And I love, I mean, I think you got to a critical issue there. So do you have a sense, like I said, some of those, it's easy to say, well, we need X more engineers and et cetera, but do you have a sense of the just purely compassionate, there's a family of six that Nicaragua is not where I want to raise my children and I want come. What's going to be our response to those folks maybe if they don't have some trained skill?

Phil Bredeesen: Well, I think we started out with I think an approach of which is if you escape from Cuba or East Germany, we would take you in. Which kind of then turned into not political oppression in that sense, but turned into, if life is not good in this country, we'll take you in. Compassionately, I'd like us to do some of that, but I think that's a political decision and so on. I think you have to recognize that, I mean, we're a wealthy country and there's a lot of jobs in this country that Americans just simply don't want to do. I mean, you can't go to a hotel and find all sorts of native-born English-speaking people taking care of the rooms, not to mention putting up drywall and roofing and the like. And that's been a traditional entree point for people that come in. They're willing to take jobs like this. They're hoping their kids step up in the world and go to college and all those kinds of things, but that's as American as apple pie.

Bill Haslam: Just having this conversation has reminded me how difficult solving the problem is, although I still think it's very solvable, but it's going to require this. It's going to require two things that just aren't popular in our politics. Number one, realizing that there's some nuance and complexity to arguments, and the country is fairly evenly divided, so it's going to mean some compromise. And compromise, as you know is a bad word in today's political, no matter which side you're on. This idea that we're right, they're totally wrong. Therefore, if you're compromising you're cheating.

I think the second thing is the reality. It's sort of what you refer to when we started. Both sides make money off of this. Both sides raise money. So if you're a Republican, you say, "Joe Biden's opened up the border to everybody." If you're a Democrat, you're saying, "Republicans want to put kids in cages," whatever the argument is, and realizing that there's not a lot of motivation for anybody to actually solve the problem because A, it's complex and requires compromise, B, some people are making a pretty good living off of it right now.

Phil Bredeesen: Yeah, I'd like to see us step outside of that world and appeal to the— I don't mean to be picking, I'm Christian appealing to the Christianity in us of what are you supposed to do with people? When I was Governor, Bill, I had this experience that was transformative for me, and that is we sent some troops, National Guard troops down to the border of Mexico and we were asked to and so on. And I went down there on one of these trips in a military plane, and at one point we were in a helicopter, and I'm sorry, this is one of these big helicopters, two gas turbine engines and two things and a bunch of people and so on, patrolling.

And we found a group of Mexican immigrants who were kind of running up this little canyon trying to hide. There must've been 20 of them in there, and they were running down in this canyon and we're in this helicopter with 4,000 horsepower or something moving our head, and everybody's breathing hard like they'd just seen their first buck. And I was sitting there saying, I mean, I almost felt, I'm not overly religious, but I mean, I was almost feeling like Jesus was sitting there and saying, "What are you doing?" And I think just appealing to people's humanity, the empathy we've talked about in these things of kind of understanding that these are human beings who drew a different lot in life than we did, would help to solve that problem.

Bill Haslam: I couldn't agree more. Like I said, I use the language, if there are people that are us created in the image of God, you can't ignore that fact. On the other hand, like I said, I think we can't just say everybody who wants to come in and find a way in, we're going to let in. And so I just got to believe there is a way to do both of those, to have a real border and to treat people as human beings. And then to realize that, like I said, we can't let the 300 million people who might come here if we said the borders— Anybody can come that wants to. But on the other hand, realize is if we totally cut our borders off and we don't take anybody, then we're eventually a shrinking and diminishing country.

Phil Bredeesen: And I mean, our country has always benefited from some flow of immigrants, and it's several different ways. It's a way, it is new ideas. It lends richness to society, when you've got these enclaves. I mean, I'm a real believer that it's difficult to have— Having a

multicultural society is difficult, that there's so many natural inclinations people have that are easy, that it's difficult to go back to that. I mean, I love living in a place where there's these ethnic enclaves, but I'm not threatened by it.

Bill Haslam: It's made our country great and hard.

Phil Bredeesen: But the idea that it introduces new ideas, it introduces a richness and complexity, I think is part of the reason for immigration. But having a policy that says, this is what this year we're going to do about it in a way of enforcing it, I agree, is important. And I honestly don't think you can allow everybody in who, because of their circumstances and the country they live in, would rather live here.

Bill Haslam: So I guess we should apply our own final question to ourselves here. So do you have an opinion or thought on immigration where you've realized the other fellow might be right?

Phil Bredeesen: Well, I have to say the experience I described to you a moment ago of being in that helicopter just sort of completely, I mean, completely changed my approach to the thing, and it became much more, much less technical and much more about having a feeling of empathy for the lives of these people who were seeking to come here.

Bill Haslam: I think my answer would be, I used to be frustrated with the idea of, well, who can build the wall? Who can build it higher, et cetera. I thought that just all feels so political, and I still think that. I still think a lot of the language around that is purely used for political purposes, but I have become more convinced that we really do have to have a border that's real. If we don't have that, I don't know how we actually define our country.

Phil Bredeesen: I agree with that notion that we ought to control our borders, and I would hope that we would not be xenophobic about it and that we'd recognize the advantages that immigrants at different levels of society and education bring to the country. But I certainly feel that that's a decision we get to make as a country and not have it thrust on us by just who wants to come here.

Bill Haslam: Thanks. This to me has been a helpful conversation reminding me both how hard and difficult it is, but I do think there actually really is a path if we want to get there.

Phil Bredeesen: It's a difficult issue. It's interesting to talk with you, and I mean, I think we're not that far apart on the basics, and we might disagree on this tactic or that or what's more important. What I think is difficult is that it's become so weaponized and the world's just full of people who are going to be single-issue voters on this issue. And so it makes it difficult for people. But really this is one where I would really hope that institutions like churches and so on would step in and remind people about the essential humanity of everyone.

Bill Haslam: I'm certainly not going to argue with that thought.

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