

Progressives for Immigration Reform

From its genesis, the anti-immigrant movement has courted ‘liberal’ figures and entities to join in its fight. While its more explicitly nativist tendencies have historically repelled self-identified progressives, the anti-immigrant movement has managed to infiltrate some of their forums. Enter Progressives for Immigration Reform (PFIR).

PFIR emblazons its public image with symbols and rhetoric that profess support for environmental causes. But under this veneer, PFIR faults the ills of American society on “mass migration,” and in fact, immigrants in general—sharing more with the bigotry of the far-right than any “progressive” cause. An investigation of the group’s history reveals troubling ties to extremism.

PFIR was founded in 2009 under the auspices of the largest anti-immigrant effort in the country: the John Tanton Network. The primary patron of the contemporary nativist movement, white nationalist John Tanton has come to be known for the constellation of organizations that he founded, funded, or otherwise supported—organizations that have worked tirelessly to eliminate immigration to the United States.

Curiously, Tanton’s foray into immigration politics began with his earlier conservationism. A former member of the Sierra Club’s National Long-range Planning Committee, he began to conceive of immigration as the primary culprit for environmental degradation and sought to attract other conservationists to his then-nascent nativism. David Pimentel, Frank Morris, and Dick Lamm, all converts to Tanton’s cause, attempted to repeal the Sierra Club’s policy of neutrality on immigration in 2004. Failing to bring the popular organization under their influence, these three are together again at PFIR—all of them holding leadership positions.

Moreover, Tanton and his ilk have again and again demonstrated that race is the primary motivation for their work; in one such instance, Tanton himself cited a perceived “Latin onslaught” that he feared would undermine the nation’s demographics. While the Tanton Network has garnered no small renown in the United States, its positions have remained controversial for numerous collaborations with white nationalists, ethnic separatists, and other such

extremists. In response, it always seeks to legitimize its stance by attracting liberals and progressives to its nativist cause—particularly, environmentalists.

Noting this void in the Network, many of its principal members helped establish PFIR. For instance, Roy Beck, president of the Tanton Network powerhouse NumbersUSA, circulated an email in 2008 soliciting suggestions for PFIR’s then-empty executive director position. When a suitable candidate was eventually found, it happened to be Leah Durant, a former staff attorney for the Immigration Reform Law Institute—a group that drafts anti-immigrant legislation under the guidance of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), Tanton’s flagship organization.

Despite all of this, PFIR insists that its project remains “progressive”; but when William Ryerson, head of both the Population Media Center and the Population Institute, left PFIR in 2011, so did any semblance of environmental credibility. Though PFIR clings to its crumbling façade, all that remains is its nativist core.

- PFIR’s current president, Phil Cafaro, has maintained a close relationship with a number of Tanton Network groups. He has written numerous times for the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) and NumbersUSA, both of which are prominent organizations within the Network.
- Cafaro also has controversial affiliations outside of the Tanton Network. In 2009, an article he wrote was reprinted in *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, a quarterly publication founded and currently edited by anti-Semite Roger Pearson.
- After being hired as executive director of PFIR, Leah Durant was interviewed in *The Social Contract*, a white nationalist journal established by Tanton. The man interviewing Durant for the journal was Peter Gemma, a former media coordinator for a chapter of the Council of Conservative Citizens, an organization that has referred to African Americans as a “retrograde species of humanity.”
- After taking her post at PFIR, Leah Durant enjoyed a column at the leading progressive digital media outlet, Huffington Post. Once her organization’s ties to white

nationalists were revealed, however, Huff Post revoked her writing privileges.

- Dick Lamm, an advisory board member for PFIR, also sits on the advisory boards of Tanton Network groups FAIR and 9/11 Families for a Secure America Foundation. According to a 1984 article in the Anchorage Daily News, Lamm stated that “terminally ill people have a ‘duty to die and get out of the way’.” Twenty years later, in 2004, Lamm stated that “new cultures” coming to this country “are diluting what we are and who we are.”