

Janice D. Schakowsky (interview)

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By Aziz Haniffa

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Three-term Congresswoman Janice D. **Schakowsky**, a Democrat who represents the Ninth District of Illinois - one of the most diverse districts in the nation with a significant population of mostly working class South Asians - is among the fiercest pro-immigration advocates in Congress.

She believes The Patriot Act pushed through Congress in the aftermath of 9/11 - which she voted against - is a draconian measure that impinges on the civil liberties of citizens, but is particularly damning against recent immigrants trying to reach for the American dream.

Schakowsky, who serves on the House Democratic leadership as chief deputy whip, vows that she is committed to dismantling un-American provisions of the legislation.

Q: Last month you held a major press conference and a sort of town hall meeting with several pro-immigration advocacy, civil rights and community groups and released a list of the top 10 anti-immigrant policies of the White House you intended to challenge. What prompted you to do this in the heart of the city?

A: In the last two years, there has been mounting pressure on immigrants in the United States. Unwarranted and punitive acts taken that deeply affect some ethnic groups within my community. People who want nothing more than to provide for their families, to hold down good jobs, to pay taxes, to become citizens of the US. Hardworking, peace-loving people in the community, who have now become targets of new immigration laws and policies feel fear in their

homes. We find people are even leaving the country, or considering leaving the country. We've seen families that are being separated and there's a different atmosphere now. We had this event on Devon Avenue highlighting the top 10 hit list - my least favorite immigration policies. It certainly wasn't an exhaustive list.

Q: You held this meeting on Chicago's Devon Avenue, which is the heart of the Indian American and South Asian community and which has traditionally been where new working class immigrant groups, including the Jewish community in Illinois had its beginnings. Was this why you chose it as a venue?

A: In some ways it is exemplary of the kind of district we have where people live in peace and work together and should be really what America is all about. Instead, a lot of that atmosphere of collegiality and American pride has been replaced by fear. When Attorney General John Ashcroft said the FBI can get engaged in the enforcement of civil immigration law, it puts fear in the heart of any immigrant to report crimes to law enforcement officials, because all of a sudden they may get caught up in some minor immigration infraction, and before they know it they are in detention or in deportation proceedings. To conduct one's daily life in safety and security has become a challenge for many people. That is why I wanted as much as anything to stand with them and say they are not alone. That in Congress I am representing them and I am not afraid to stand up. That is because there has been an atmosphere of intimidation even from members of Congress that wait a minute, are you not really for security here? What about homeland security? We have to get tough on immigrants.

Q: Obviously, you do not believe the stand you are taking on behalf of these new immigrants in no way compromises security?

A: I am as much for security as anyone of the immigrant people standing with me. They want to live in safety too. They do not support acts of terrorism. We have to be able to distinguish between terrorists and immigrants. It is not one and the same thing. But that's the way it's being treated.

Q: After 9/11, a lot of immigrants have been detained with no access to counsel or family for minor infractions, and this has devastated families. Among the thousands held, very few, if any, have anything to do with criminal activities, least of terrorist connections...

A: That's exactly right. Absolutely. I want them to be able to have access to counsel. To be in a jurisdiction where their family can be nearby. Where their lawyers are nearby. But the process itself has been short-circuited now with the Board of Immigration Appeals reduced now to one judge instead of three. They have reduced the number of judges from 23 to 11 -

cut it more than in half. What you get are these one-line responses in these cases and it is not a surprise that in one year the rate of rejected appeals has skyrocketed 46 percent. It has gone from 59 percent rejections to 86 percent of these appeals now. You can't tell me that there has been some change that would warrant that huge increase. The change has been attitude - attitude toward immigrants.

Q: How do you answer critics who turn around and say, too bad, after 9/11, it's a whole new world? That you have to infringe or compromise on some civil liberties we are used to for security?

A: I think what we have to be un-defensive about is saying what is it about the United States of America that makes it worth defending in the world. That makes it worth exporting our values and the things that are great about our country. At the top of the list is that we value and respect civil liberties of individuals. Now the rules of the game are being changed such that individual liberties are being compromised way beyond where it should be. There is always a balance that should be struck between security and liberty. But if you sacrifice liberty for security, as Thomas Jefferson said, you will have neither.

Q: You believe that's the situation we are in now?

A: Absolutely. We have gone too far when ordinary people have to worry when they go to a library and log on to the Internet that where they go may be tracked. We are developing a total information awareness system. Data-mining. Putting together all kinds of information about individuals who are just ordinary citizens. Big brother at work here.

Q: So what should people who are bothered by all of this do?

A: All Americans should say, I am the patriotic one when I stand up and say, enough is enough.' Let's not target loyal, patriotic, hardworking Americans.

Q: Are the goalposts of The Patriot Act for example being moved further and further afield as people try to comprehend what it's all about? Even attorneys and counsels are finding it difficult to explain to clients where they stand and what their recourses are...

There is another element there. You don't always know exactly where the goalposts are because there's a lot going on in secret. You can as a non-citizen be detained indefinitely without due process. That's very dangerous in the US. We cannot tolerate that. It's totally un-American. So much is shrouded now in secret hearings and secret detentions. Even conversations between the lawyer and client aren't private anymore. All these

things are very difficult for people to know. What are the rules of the game? How do you play this game? The administration is very careful to name things like US Patriot Act. So if you are not for the US Patriot Act, well, what are you then? You must be unpatriotic. You know, they frame the discussions in that way. It's like George Orwell's 1984. Doublethink. You have to always think the opposite of what the name is to understand what's going on.

Q: Is there a more expansive Patriot Act 2 in the offing?

A: Yes. Even though this has not emerged as a real bill, I am at the point now where I believe that even ideas launched as trial balloons are the real intention of this administration. I worry about it and in the Patriot 2 Act, native born citizens could be stripped of citizenship the attorney general deems they have been supporting in some way a terrorist organization as defined by the attorney general. All Americans, naturalized citizens, all residents, citizens or non-citizens are to worry about the direction we are going when it comes to the erosion of civil liberties.

Q: Hasn't all this xenophobia manifested in almost blatant racial profiling of minority groups and immigrants?

A: There is no question about it that there has been an increase in racial profiling and that has certainly affected a lot of people here in my community who may wear a head covering of some sort, men or women. I talked to a young man who came up to me at a street and introduced himself. I said, 'Haven't we met?' He said, 'Yes, the last time we met my name was Muhammad and now its Adam. I changed my name.' That made me so sad. I felt like crying when he said that.

He must have been in his early 20s and he felt that as he sets out into the world in the United States, he didn't have the right name and had to change it. I can't help but think that it was more than just a spelling change. That he gave up something very important to do that and made a decision to do that. In the US, people shouldn't have to do that.

Q: You have pledged to fight for the resurrections of these civil liberties and rights, but aren't you going up against a brick wall?

When it will change is when more and more Americans recognize that it is their own civil liberties I am talking about. Citizens who really haven't really paid attention to the problems immigrants are facing so much. We have to get the word out that their own privacy, individual rights, to maneuvering from the Internet to associating with people they want to, is being challenged.

I sense we are getting to that point. That they the administration are overreaching and that there was a lot of shock and awe if you will at the

notion of Patriot 2. I am hoping there will be a critical mass achieved when people say, 'Stop, enough, this is not right.'