

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
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Ranking Member, Judiciary Committee
Immigration Subcommittee Hearing
On Immigration Enforcement
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On May 25, after almost a month of consideration, a bipartisan majority of the Senate passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill, S.2611, also known as the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2006. Since that time, there has been no progress on enacting the kind of fair, realistic, comprehensive immigration reform that the Senate and President Bush have been seeking. It is comprehensive in that it includes a pathway to earned citizenship, a temporary worker program, stronger interior enforcement and greater border enforcement. After more than five years of inaction by this Administration and the Republican Congress, the Senate showed the way toward significant action and progress on an issue of fundamental importance to the Nation and to all Americans.

Today, a front page story in The Washington Times notes that some commentators associated with the President's party have urged the Administration and the Republican Congress to back down. I hope that the President does not give in, as we saw him do last year when he withdrew his nomination of Harriet Miers in the face of conservative criticism and before even a hearing on her nomination could be held. The hopes and aspirations of millions who have demonstrated their commitment to this country's ideals through hard work and the peaceful petitioning of the Government have been raised by the Senate's debate and action in passing this comprehensive bill. This hard-won progress should not be undercut and destroyed by partisan politics and mean-spiritedness.

I have quoted the President's thoughtful words from the immigration debate during which he said: "We cannot build a unified country by inciting people to anger, or playing on anyone's fears, or exploiting the issue of immigration for political gain. We must always remember that real lives will be affected by our debates and decisions, and that every human being has dignity and value" With passage of the comprehensive Senate bill, the challenge was to the President to demonstrate leadership by making these views part of our national policy. I hope the answer to that challenge is not his abandoning the bipartisan effort toward comprehensive immigration reform.

Regrettably, the indication from the Senate Republican leadership is not support for the Senate-passed bill that they trumpeted as a triumph as recently as last month, but its abandonment. By way of contrast, the Democratic Leader asked the Senate to proceed to a House-Senate conference on the recently-passed immigration bill. Unfortunately, Senate Republicans objected to the Democratic Leader's request that we proceed by the usual practice of taking the House-passed bill and inserting the language passed by the Senate so that we can proceed to a House-Senate conference. Instead of spending time pandering to a faction of the Republicans' political base, I hope that the President will work with us to make progress on our bipartisan immigration initiative. Republican and Democratic senators have said that we will need the President's help to make comprehensive immigration reform a reality. Aside from a few choreographed events, the President has been AWOL on the issue. He has not been effective in urging comprehensive immigration reform from the recalcitrant Republican House leadership or helping us in the Senate overcome threats of procedural objections to proceeding to conference.

Today's hearing is about interior enforcement. Both The New York Times and The Washington Post have front page stories today on the lack of enforcement during this Administration. The number of employers prosecuted for unlawfully employing immigrants had until quite recently been miniscule. Law enforcement against those businesses

that exploit immigrant labor has been virtually nonexistent during this Administration. Workplace enforcement must include more than just arresting those who are working illegally; there must also be accountability for unscrupulous employers who take unfair advantage of those who desperately want to work to improve their lives. I hope this hearing serves its purpose of fleshing out the record of the mistakes and lack of enforcement during the last five years, to make all the clearer the need for action on comprehensive immigration reform legislation.

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