

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
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Ranking Member, Judiciary Committee
Hearing on Examining the Need for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, Part II

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I am disappointed that in recent weeks we have seen election-year politics diminish the hard work the Senate has done to find a comprehensive solution to the nation's immigration problem. The Senate worked hard to create a bipartisan bill that delivered fair and comprehensive reforms. Since its passage we have seen the Republican Congress reject efforts to move forward and make progress, despite the efforts of the Senate Democratic leader to get the matter to conference. Instead of progress toward legislation we see a series of after-the-fact hearings. A few, like the one held by the Senate Armed Services Committee this week and the Chairman's field hearing last week contribute to the record supporting the Senate bill. Others seem intended to do nothing more than inflame the passions of anti-immigrant activists and attempt to doom any chance of progress towards a comprehensive solution.

The lines that have been drawn by opponents to comprehensive legislation are clear: The anti-immigrant faction opposes a fair and comprehensive approach. They abhor establishing a pathway to earned citizenship. Apparently they believe this anti-immigrant position will help them in the upcoming elections. I hope not. I think we reject the best of America and our values when we refuse to recognize all that immigrants bring and mean to this country. I hope that fear and intolerance are not a winning political strategy.

It is unrealistic to think that we can apprehend and deport every undocumented individual the Bush-Cheney Administration has allowed into the United States. The reality is that our economy depends upon the labor of foreign workers. Small and large business owners have told us this, the Mayor of the one of the largest cities in the world--who is no stranger to economic success--has told us this, and labor unions have told us this.

The Wall Street Journal editorial board recently wrote that the choice--framed by immigration opponents as a choice between "amnesty" or border security--is a false one. It is false because we

can have border security at the same time we bring out of the shadows and assimilate individuals who are hard working, honest people contributing to our economy.

I do not often agree with The Wall Street Journal editorial board, but in this case we do agree. When border patrol agents are not spending time and resources apprehending people coming here to work, they can focus on preventing the true threats to our national security. I believe there is real merit to the President's argument that if we increase the opportunity to come to the United States legally, we will reduce the demand for illegal entry.

It is disheartening to watch this debate devolve into a discourse with tinges of intolerance for those who come as immigrants. We are a welcoming, diverse country built and enriched by immigrants. Isolating ourselves, and turning this country into a police state is not the way our Nation will remain the beacon of freedom and prosperity it has always been.

Many decry a realistic immigration policy as the downfall of our unique American culture and way of life. In these arguments, I hear the echoes of those who resisted women finally obtaining the right to vote and when the modern civil rights movement helped end Jim Crowism. We are an inclusive society that draws strength from diversity and believes in equality.

The opposition to providing bilingual ballots to bilingual American citizens, who are vested with the right to vote, is a particularly troubling aspect of this debate. A recent Washington Post editorial pointed out the obvious: when more eligible voters can make an informed and intelligent choice in voting, our democracy benefits from their participation. Section 203's guarantee of equality is not just for immigrants but for Native Americans and those who have long been citizens. The reality is that people who come to the United States embrace the English language along with patriotism. Immigrants do not deserve or need the legal restrictions sought by the English-only crowd. And America loses when we discriminate on the basis of national origin or language.

Let us have faith in our traditional values and show the strength and purpose needed to accomplish the comprehensive reform we need. Our democracy and free markets can adapt. We should not fear these changes. We should embrace the cultural and economic opportunities that change will bring. Most importantly, along with a comprehensive policy will come better border security. When government agencies can identify and account for those who are here, and those who are crossing the border, we will be more secure as a result of that knowledge. We know well that no matter how much effort we pour into locking up our border, those who desire to come to

the United States will find a way, which in turn will lead to more people in the shadows of society, more deaths in our deserts, and more trafficking in human beings.

It is critical that President Bush make good on his commitment to support the Senate's work. Without his active support and his steadfast dedication, the congressional Republican efforts to derail comprehensive reform will succeed. Many conservative commentators have praised the President for his "political courage." I hope the President will remain true to his pledge to support comprehensive reform our immigration laws.

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