

PETER RODINO AND SPECIAL INTERESTS

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Body

Immigration reform, says Brooklyn's Representative Charles Schumer, is a "metaphor for governance . . . Can the general interest transcend the specific interest?" And how! is the answer Senate Finance Chairman Bob Packwood has just given for tax reform. The same could still be true for immigration reform - except that the movement is backward. This was the week the bill was supposed to go to the House. What it produced instead was five suspicious weeks of more delay.

This balanced, bipartisan bill embodies the general interest. It would enable America to be just in deciding which of the clamoring millions around the world it will admit. It would enable America to be humane in its treatment of those who, having sneaked in, now live under a cloud of exploitation. Yet the bill remains pinned between growers determined not to run short of farmhands to pick their crops and union leaders who fear that poor foreign workers will undercut wages.

As tax reform came finally to depend on a Senate Republican chairman from the West, immigration reform now depends on a House Democratic chairman from Newark: **Peter Rodino**.

Peter Rodino, child of Italian immigrants, a Congressman for 37 years and chairman of the Judiciary Committee, knows the importance of immigration reform better than anyone. In the 1970's, he twice won House passage of reform bills only to see them die in the Senate. Now the dragging shoe is on the other foot. The Senate has passed reform three times and the House has repeatedly dithered. Reform finally passed once but died in conference.

Would Mr. Rodino let that happen again? No, he said, not if President Reagan personally reaffirmed his commitment. The President did that, in March. Okay, said the chairman; we'll mark up the legislation in early May and get the bill to the floor. This was to be the week.

Now, Mr. Rodino has again gone along with a request for more time. Representatives Schumer and Leon Panetta and Howard Berman of California are trying to negotiate agreement between growers and labor. Their delay may mask shrewd tactics, avoiding torpedoes later. But the negotiators have already been at it for five months. Considering how dyspeptic the House's Democratic leaders have been about this bill, a five-week delay this late in the session is cause for alarm.

If Mr. Rodino wants immigration reform to curdle and die, he is, like Speaker O'Neill and Majority Leader Wright, a canny parliamentarian who knows how to strangle without leaving fingerprints. But if he wants it to pass, he also knows what to do. In his 19 terms in the House, **Peter Rodino** has traveled some historic paths; he chaired the Nixon impeachment hearings in 1974. Now immigration reform may be his biggest remaining milestone. How he'll be remembered depends on which way he is headed when he goes by.

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