

Immigration 'Nirvana,' Lost; Thanks largely to Democrats, the Senate missed an opportunity.

The Washington Post

April 8, 2006 Saturday, Final Edition

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The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: Editorial; A22

Length: 488 words

Body

THE **SENATE** COULD have left town yesterday with a workable, if imperfect, **immigration** bill that would have let millions of people living here illegally come out of the shadows. It had before it a deal that could have attracted 70 votes; it had the backing of the White House and the support of **Senate** Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), despite his previous, enforcement-only stance.

But after two weeks of slogging toward compromise, the deal blew up over a procedural standoff on whether to move forward with voting for amendments, as Republicans were demanding, and if so, for how many. Republicans blamed Democratic obstructionism aimed at keeping voters' attention focused on the punitive, Republican-sponsored House bill.

"It's not gone forward because there's a political advantage for **Democrats** not to have an **immigration** bill," said **Senate** Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter (R-Pa.). **Democrats** blamed Republican bad faith and said Republicans refused to impose a reasonable limit on amendments. "The amendments were being offered by people who didn't want the bill," said **Senate** Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.).

Both of those assertions contain elements of truth. But **Democrats** -- whether their motive was partisan advantage or legitimate fear of a bad bill emerging from conference with the House -- are the ones who refused, in the end, to proceed with debate on amendments, which is, after all, how legislation gets made. The unfortunate result is that momentum toward balanced reform may be **lost**. "The Democratic leadership played politics with the prospect of 10 million immigrants getting on a path to citizenship," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National **Immigration** Forum, a pro-**immigration** group. "It seems that Democratic leaders wanted an issue, not a bill."

Too bad, because, as Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) described the measure, "compared with the status quo, it's **nirvana**." The compromise was a slightly tweaked version of a bill produced by the **Senate** Judiciary Committee and modeled on the proposal by Mr. McCain and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.). As retooled by Sens. Mel Martinez (R-Fla.) and Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), the bill still would have entitled almost all of the nation's 11 million or more illegal immigrants to legal status and, ultimately, citizenship. Moreover, it would have reduced incentives for future illegal **immigration** by creating a significant supply of legal guest worker permits -- a new program that would, as well, give foreign workers the chance to become permanent residents and ultimately citizens.

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The measure wasn't perfect, and certainly there are risks in going to conference with the House and its enforcement-only approach. But ***Democrats*** putting political self-interest over solving a serious policy problem ought to worry that their actions will backfire with the very people whose interests they are purporting to protect.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: POLITICAL PARTIES (91%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); ***IMMIGRATION*** (89%); CITIZENSHIP (89%); LEGISLATION (89%); POLITICS (89%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); CITIZENSHIP LAW (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (77%); EXECUTIVES (71%)

Person: CHUCK HAGEL (79%); TED KENNEDY (58%); ARLEN SPECTER (58%); HARRY REID (58%); MEL MARTINEZ (58%); JOHN MCCAIN (57%)

Geographic: NEBRASKA, USA (79%)

Load-Date: April 8, 2006