

Showdown on immigration in the works; Democrats push old bill as GOP balks

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Body

Washington --- In an effort to force a debate on immigration next week, Senate Democrats announced Wednesday that they will reintroduce a bill from last year that would give most illegal immigrants a chance at citizenship.

The move upset Republicans, who want more time to forge a separate compromise measure.

But Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said at a Capitol Hill news conference that last year's bill would be a starting point for debate and that an "open amendment process" would allow for changes. He also said a compromise measure could be substituted if it emerges by next week.

"This is the time to do something about our broken immigration system," he said.

Last year, when the GOP-controlled both houses of Congress, 23 Republicans joined all Senate Democrats to approve the immigration legislation. But the House passed a vastly different bill that rejected citizenship provisions, which Republicans there labeled "amnesty."

Negotiations between the two chambers to reconcile the bills never occurred.

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Wednesday that a compromise has been in the works for months and that lawmakers need more time to negotiate.

"We need more time to flesh out the grand compromise, the grand bargain that we have structured so far," he said.

Two Cabinet members --- Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff and Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez --- have been meeting with key Republican and Democratic lawmakers to craft the bill.

Points of contention include whether future temporary workers will have a chance to become permanent residents and citizens and whether immigrants will have to return to their home countries before re-entering the United States legally, people familiar with the negotiations said.

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Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said President Bush --- who backs **immigration** reform despite the Republican opposition --- "has got to be personally involved" in the negotiations.

"He cannot just send up Cabinet members and ask them to speak with a few members of the president's party," Leahy said.

Sen. John Cornyn, a Texas Republican and one of the negotiators on the compromise **bill**, said Reid's decision to introduce last year's **bill** and force a debate next week is "a risky strategy."

"We've still got a lot of **work** to do on the **bill**. I hate to think that by forcing the issue, that (the) wheels come off. This is too important for us to fail," he said.

Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), a sponsor of last year's **bill**, endorsed Reid's strategy.

"Unless we set some guideposts, some guidelines, some definite periods on an issue of this magnitude and importance, the Senate will not address it," he said.

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