

Three signs that a bill is possible

The Philadelphia Inquirer

July 5, 2006 Wednesday

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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Found on Philly.com

Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. A11

Length: 770 words

Body

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Is it **possible** that the House and Senate will agree on an immigration **bill**? For most of June, the answer seemed to be no.

The House Republican leadership announced it would not appoint members of a conference committee to reconcile the border-security-only **bill** the House passed in December with the border-security-plus-guest-worker-plus-legalization **bill** passed by the Senate in May. Instead, House Republicans would hold hearings around the country this summer - hearings expected to be forums for complaints about illegal immigration and demands that border control be strengthened before any legalization or guest-worker program is passed.

Meanwhile, the Senate seemed likely to stick with the approach taken by a bipartisan, mostly Democratic majority that rejected limiting the **bill** to border security. Deadlock seemed likely.

But **three** developments last week may be reviving the chance an immigration **bill** will be passed. The first was the renomination of Rep. Christopher B. Cannon in Utah's Republican primary on June 27. Cannon has supported guest-worker legislation and measures to allow children of illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition to state colleges and universities. His opponent, John Jacob, spent thousands of his own dollars to attack Cannon for supporting "amnesty," and actually led Cannon in the Republican convention, where incumbents are usually renominated routinely. Polls showed the race close. But Cannon won 56 percent to 44 percent, down just slightly from his 58 percent to 42 percent two years ago over an immigration opponent who spent much less money.

If Cannon had lost, House Republicans surely would have panicked and stonewalled any approach but border-security-only. But his victory - and the fact that he ran ads with endorsements from President Bush, who supports a comprehensive **bill** - indicates that his positions are not political death, even in a district that went 77 percent to 20 percent Republican in the 2004 presidential election.

The second development was an interview with Sen. Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) in the Washington Times on June 27. Specter, chairman of the Judiciary Committee, supported the Senate **bill**. He would be the lead Senate voice in any conference committee. Specter still insists that the Senate will accept only a comprehensive **bill**. But he conceded

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he might accept a version that made guest-worker and legalization programs contingent on concrete achievements in border security.

The third development was the June 28 meeting at the White House of Rep. Mike Pence (R., Ind.) with Bush and Vice President Cheney. Pence, chairman of the House Republican Study Committee, has advanced a guest-worker plan based on one by Colorado rancher Helen Kriebel, which would allow workers to apply in their home countries to "Ellis Island centers" run by private firms, which would match them with jobs from employers in the United States.

It's an attempt to get around the current cumbersome green-card bureaucracy.

Guest-worker slots would not lead to citizenship, but would legalize workers who comply. The Pence program could be phased in after a period in which border security was strengthened.

The Cannon victory, the Specter concession, and the Pence plan point toward a **possible** compromise that could conceivably be adopted by a conference committee and win majorities in both houses. They also direct the attention of those on all sides of this issue to the practical, concrete realities of American life. If advocates of border security and employer sanctions get their way, and there are high-tech steps to close the sieve on the border and create a forgery-proof identification card system, then what happens to the seven million or so illegal immigrants who are currently working in the United States? Presumably they go away - but in the process, we lose a labor force that our economy needs to maximize production. If advocates of a comprehensive **bill** get their way, and we don't have high-tech ID, then presumably we would still have millions of illegals in our midst.

It is surely not beyond our technological capabilities to secure the border and to provide legal worker identification, at least if we subcontract these tasks to the private sector, which is so much better at these things than government. Neither the House nor the Senate **bill** seems likely to achieve those goals. So it's good to note that there is a chance, maybe only a small chance, that a conference committee can come up with a **bill** that does.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: BORDER CONTROL (94%); IMMIGRATION (93%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (92%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (90%); LEGISLATION (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); FOREIGN LABOR (90%); NATIONAL SECURITY (89%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (89%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); ELECTIONS (78%); PRIMARY ELECTIONS (77%); POLITICAL PARTY CONVENTIONS (77%); APPOINTMENTS (77%); CONFERENCES & CONVENTIONS (75%); POLLS & SURVEYS (73%); CHILDREN (71%); TUITION FEES (71%); HEADS OF GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS (69%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (66%)

Company: U S NEWS & WORLD REPORT INC (91%)

Industry: COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (66%)

Person: CHRIS CANNON (79%); MIKE PENCE (79%); ARLEN SPECTER (78%); DICK CHENEY (58%); GEORGE W BUSH (57%)

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Geographic: UTAH, USA (79%)

Load-Date: July 5, 2006

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