

Reason for hope

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

So far, so good. The bipartisan immigration bill inched forward Tuesday when a majority of senators voted to revive the legislation and begin debating amendments. It is expected that, by Thursday, another vote will be held - this one to close the debate entirely and put the measure to a vote. As it stands, the outcome is too close to call. Yet supporters have reason to be optimistic. But what if? What if the Senate immigration bill, once amended, doesn't get the votes it needs and immigration reform goes down in flames?

Some conservatives would rejoice. That's an interesting reaction, given that these are the same folks who, not long ago, demanded that Congress address an illegal immigration "crisis." We simply would be back where we started. And yet critics are doing their best to bring about just that outcome - without proposing a workable alternative.

Conservative radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh warned his listeners that "this bill is worse than doing nothing." Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., a leading critic, has said he and his colleagues are "working hard to make sure we get a good bill or none."

If this bill fails, the message would be: Senators can still approve pay raises and pass out pork, but on the hard issues, many of them would rather do nothing than do something controversial. It makes you glad this bunch isn't wrestling with women's suffrage or slavery or Social Security.

Even so, if immigration reform dies because of a fear of amnesty, well then, there would still be amnesty. Illegal immigrants would still go to work, and employers would still hire them. And the extremes on the right and the left who helped torpedo this bill would still gripe about how the system is broken and how there is a crisis and how Congress has to do something about it. And, meanwhile, in Washington, it would be clearer than ever that lawmakers are never going to do anything about it.

The critics have it wrong. They think it's better to do nothing, but doing nothing should not be an option.

One of the few bright spots in this debate is President Bush, who has demonstrated real leadership. On Saturday, during his weekly radio address, Bush urged lawmakers to "summon the courage" to support the bill and stated plainly that "the status quo is unacceptable." Tuesday, Bush said immigration reform presented a "historic opportunity for Congress to act, for Congress to replace a system that is not working with one that we believe will work a lot better."

Bush also praised immigrants and "a country where people come with dreams and aspirations and through hard work can realize those dreams and aspirations." As a result, he said, "the country is better off. Our soul is

constantly renewed. Our spirit is invigorated when people come here and realize the blessings of America."

The president gets it. Let's hope enough members of Congress do, as well.

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