US Congress begins debate on milestone anti-immigrant legislation

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The Senate voted 97-1 yesterday to open debate on legislation to revamp the US immigration system and address the legal status of 1.8 million young undocumented immigrants who are either beneficiaries of or eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

The program, which shields from deportation young undocumented immigrants brought to the US as children, was terminated last fall by President Trump, who set a March 5 date for the termination to take effect.

Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has given no firm pledge to start debate on immigration and DACA in the lower chamber, saying he will do so only if the proposed bill is backed by President Trump, who is demanding a further buildup of border security and immigration police and prisons, along with sharp reductions in legal immigration.

Immigrants could wish for no worse group of people to determine their fates than the 535 corporate hacks and military-intelligence stooges who make up the United States Congress.

The strongest warning must be made: there is no possibility of a positive outcome from the debate in Washington. There are two alternatives: either no agreement is reached, leaving hundreds of thousands of immigrant youth to face deportation, or a deal is worked out that tightens restrictions on immigration, separates immigrants from their families, and further militarizes the border, causing thousands more to die in search of a better life.

The tone will be set Tuesday when debate begins on Republican senators Tom Cotton and David Perdue's proposal, which is a Senate version of Trump's plan to cut legal immigration by 22 million over the next several decades. The plan requires that DACA recipients and DACA-eligible youth sign their own deportation orders as a precondition for entering a 12-year "path to citizenship," during which applicants will face deportation unless they are in the military, employed or in school. They will also be ineligible for social benefits during the entire period.

The Democratic Party is in complete agreement with this framework. Its representatives are using the debate to engage in one of the most cynical political operations in recent memory. Although the Democrats have already agreed to the most right-wing elements of Trump's immigration proposal, they are posturing as defenders of immigrants so as to avoid a catastrophic drop-off in electoral support from Latino voters.

This was on display last week when House Democratic Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi gave an eight-hour speech from the House floor to oppose the Senate budget deal on the grounds that it provided no protection for DACA recipients, also referred to as "Dreamers."

"We have no right to talk about Dreamers and to tell their stories and take pride in their actions unless we are willing to take action to support them," Pelosi said in her speech.

But the *New York Times* noted Monday: "Ms. Pelosi now says she wanted it [the budget deal] to pass all along. 'We had a great bill; we got everything,' she said in an interview Friday, adding, 'Republicans gave away the store.'"

Pelosi thereby admitted that her speech was nothing more than a dishonest public relations stunt made long after she had helped ensure the bill would pass without protection for DACA recipients.

The real line of the Democratic Party, behind the vacuous references to the importance of immigrants, was expressed by Democratic Senator Richard

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Blumenthal, who told a New York radio station, “On the wall [Trump’s border wall with Mexico], we would be willing to be flexible on border security.”

Referring to electronic trip wires and military equipment used by the border patrol to capture, arrest and deport immigrants seeking refuge in the US, Blumenthal said, “There are ways to be bipartisan ... in devising solutions to make our borders more secure using surveillance and censors, better training for agents." He added that "strengthening some of the physical structures and fences” is also a Democratic proposal.

Democratic Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer echoed this sentiment yesterday when he said, “We have long supported effective border security,” adding, “the key is to find a consensus bill largely acceptable to a significant number of members in both parties.”

It is possible that a sufficient number of Senate Democrats will support an extreme right-wing proposal put forward by the Republicans to secure its passage without requiring most Democrats to vote “yes.”

Sixty votes are required to pass a bill out of the Senate, and these ten Democrats plus the 51 Republicans would make 61. In January, five Democrats voted with the Republicans to pass the first budgetary continuing resolution, including Doug Jones, Joe Donnelly, Heidi Heitkamp, Joe Manchin and Claire McCaskill. The latter four—plus six other Democrats—are up for reelection in 2018 in states Trump carried in 2016. Manchin even opposed criticism of Trump’s January remark calling for harsher restrictions on “shithole” countries in the Caribbean and Africa.

Another possibility is that a bipartisan group of senators will pass a “moderate” bill that is, in reality, anything but. Multiple proposals have been advanced by different pairs of senators, each accepting calls for more militarization of the border and long, onerous “pathways to citizenship” for DACA recipients. Whatever is passed in the Senate will then be transformed into an even more anti-immigrant bill in the House, where Republicans have more than the bare majority required to pass legislation.

Each time Democrats and Republicans have taken up immigration “reform” legislation, the outcome has been disastrous for immigrants.

In 1996, Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act by bipartisan margins of 72-27 in the Senate and 278-127 in the House. This bill authorized construction of a border wall, established reentry bans, dramatically expanded the types of crimes that make immigrants deportable, and sanctioned the jailing of deportees for two years without a court hearing and without a lawyer. Democrats voting “yes” included Harry Reid, Dianne Feinstein, Steny Hoyer, Sheila Jackson-Lee, Joseph Kennedy II and Elijah Cummings.

That same year, Congress passed the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act by 91-8 in the Senate and 293-133 in the House. This placed major restrictions on asylum applications and stripped federal courts of jurisdiction over many habeas corpus petitions. Democrats voting “yes” included Joseph Biden, Barbara Boxer, John Kerry, Richard Durbin, Carl Levin, James Clyburn and Charles Schumer.

In 2005, the REAL ID Act passed Congress by a 99-0 margin in the Senate and 261-161 in the House. This bill placed further restrictions on asylum seekers, facilitated speedy deportations and waived laws blocking construction of a border wall. Democrats voting “yes” included Schumer, Reid, Boxer, Biden, Edward Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and Debbie Stabenow.

In 2006, Congress passed the Secure Fences Act by margins of 80-19 in the Senate and 283-138 in the House. The bill funded construction and militarization of the border. Democratic “yes” voters included Stabenow, Obama, Clinton and Ron Wyden.

The fact that Donald Trump holds the threat of an executive veto over the proceedings makes it all the more certain that any deal to emerge from this xenophobic legislative body will be a further milestone in the assault on immigrants and democratic rights in the US.

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