

As lame duck Congress convenes

Democrats seek agreements with Trump administration

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A lame duck session of Congress opens today with Democrats signaling that they wish to reach agreement with the Trump White House on a range of budget and policy issues in order to “clear the decks” before the new Democratic-controlled House of Representatives takes office in January.

The Senate and House must pass seven of 12 separate appropriations bills by December 8 to avoid a partial shutdown of the federal government, with the most contentious bill involving funding for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The House version of the bill, passed by the outgoing Republican majority, provided \$5 billion for Trump’s wall along the US-Mexico border. The Senate version provides only \$1.6 billion and it is not specifically earmarked for a wall.

House-Senate talks on the DHS budget reportedly involve a deal to provide some initial funding for the wall in exchange for a limited restoration of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program established by President Obama through an executive order and rescinded by Trump using the same method last year. DACA allows about 700,000 undocumented immigrants—so-called “Dreamers”—brought to the US as children to work and attend college without fear of deportation.

“On the general issue of border security, we’ve had great discussions in the appropriations process. They’ve been bipartisan,” Senate Democratic Leader Charles Schumer told reporters. “And I would hope that the President wouldn’t interfere and we could get something good done.”

On the House side, Representative Nita Lowey of New York, who is expected to become chair of the powerful Appropriations Committee in January, urged a deal on the DHS budget that would include partial funding of the wall. “House Democrats support smart investments in border security,” she said in a statement, “but we strongly oppose spending \$5 billion on President Trump’s proposed wall.”

A spokesman for Lowey told the *Wall Street Journal* the

Democrats would like to complete the negotiations on the wall for DACA deal this year, rather than carry it over into next year when they will control the House. “With the December 7 deadline looming, it’s important for Congress to get its work done on time and prevent a prolonged government shutdown,” the spokesman said.

House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, who is likely to become Speaker in the new Congress, insisted throughout the fall campaign that Democratic candidates for the House should not “take the bait” of making public declarations of opposition to Trump’s brutal persecution of immigrants, including the forced separation of parents and children, the deployment of thousands of heavily armed regular troops to the border, the fear-mongering about caravans of Central American immigrants traveling north through Mexico towards the US border, and the threat to revoke “birthright citizenship,” guaranteed for the past 150 years under the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution.

The statements by Schumer and Lowey demonstrate that the refusal to oppose Trump’s anti-immigrant policies was not merely a campaign tactic—as reactionary as that would be—but reflected a broader willingness by the Democratic leadership to accommodate Trump’s policies and share responsibility for them.

It is noteworthy that none of the Democratic congressional leaders and House members who took to the airwaves on the Sunday television network interview programs said a word about the defense of immigrants or condemned Trump for his vicious, race-baiting attacks on the Central American refugees and his claim that he has the power to gut an amendment to the US Constitution by executive order.

Those appearing on at least one program—and some on several—included Pelosi and Schumer; Jerrold Nadler, who will chair the House Judiciary Committee; Elijah Cummings, who will chair the House Government Oversight Committee; Adam Schiff, who will chair the House Intelligence Committee; and two newly elected

representatives, Elissa Slotkin of Michigan, a former CIA operative, and Lauren Underwood of Illinois, a former Obama administration official.

Nearly all these Democrats cited as their main concern, not the defense of helpless immigrants being brutalized by the Trump administration, but the defense of Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller, the former FBI director who is heading the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and possible collusion by the Trump campaign.

Schiff, Nadler and Cummings all denounced the appointment of Justice Department chief of staff Matthew Whitaker as acting attorney general, following the forced resignation of Attorney General Jeff Sessions. Whitaker is replacing deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein as the day-to-day supervisor of the Mueller investigation, which he had previously declared—while a right-wing media commentator—should be shut down.

Nadler said that the first action of the House Judiciary Committee under his leadership would be to take testimony from Whitaker, by issuing a subpoena if necessary, on how he would handle the Mueller investigation. Schiff said that Whitaker should recuse himself from an oversight role, as Sessions did because of his prominent role in the Trump 2016 campaign. He told ABC, “our top priority is to protect the Mueller investigation, to protect the integrity of that investigation from the White House attempt to stifle it and to interfere with it.”

In statements immediately after it became clear the Democrats would recapture the House, Pelosi declared that she had every intention of working with Trump, telling reporters, “In terms of working with the president, I just would say that I worked very productively with President Bush when we had the majority and he had the presidency.” She added that she would try to prevent “scattershot freelancing” by Democratic-controlled House committees seeking to investigate the Trump administration.

In 2006, when the Democrats won control of the House and Pelosi became Speaker for the first time, her first priority was to block any effort to impeach Bush for war crimes in Iraq, including launching a war in violation of international law and on the basis of lies about “weapons of mass destruction” and supposed ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Later, she pushed through measures to fully fund the US military effort in Iraq, blocking any effort to use the “power of the purse” to force an end to the war.

In an interview on the CBS news program “Face the Nation” on Sunday, Pelosi was asked directly, “On immigration, would you try to block any attempt to fund the border wall?”

She responded: “Let’s just enlarge that issue into what we need to do as a country. We certainly have to protect our borders, and Democrats know that, and we have always worked to do that. I support protecting our border, and we have done that, and there are many ways to protect the border before tens of billions of dollars building a wall where technology and personnel and the rest could possibly do the job. But whatever it is has to be tied to comprehensive immigration reform.”

Pelosi went on to declare that her main purpose in staying on as the Democratic leader in the House was “to protect the Affordable Care Act. That’s my main issue.” She went on to cite the influx of new female members of Congress. “We have many women coming in with experience in national security,” referring to the CIA agents Elissa Slotkin and Abigail Spanberger, and a half dozen female military veterans as well.

Schumer, appearing on the ABC program “This Week,” cited the letter sent by himself, Pelosi and several other prominent Democrats suggesting that the new acting attorney general Whitaker should recuse himself from any decisions involving the Mueller investigation. Without that, he said, House and Senate Democrats “will attempt to add to must-pass legislation, in this case the spending bill, legislation that would prevent Mr. Whitaker from interfering with the Mueller investigation.”

The incoming chair of the House Government Oversight Committee, Elijah Cummings, denied that he was about to go to war with the Trump administration, then cited drug prices and other health care issues as likely subjects for upcoming congressional hearings once the Democrats take control of the House. He also suggested there was a basis for agreement with the White House on infrastructure spending.



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