



"Without fear and without favour"

Tuesday April 2 2013

US immigration policy reform

Washington is close to a deal that would be good for all

Perhaps it is the blossom in the air. But Washington may be about to agree on an overhaul of America's dilapidated immigration system. A final deal is not yet complete. However, the bipartisan "group of eight" senators to whom the White House has outsourced negotiations is confident there will be a draft soon. The prospect should be welcomed. At the very least, it would reassure us that Washington is capable of taking a break from its chronic dysfunction. However, doubts remain whether a bill could get through the Republican House of Representatives. And concerns also remain on whether the bill would do enough to lift high-skilled immi-

gration. First, the bill's big positives. Since the 2007 recession, the great wave of Mexican immigration to the US has broken. It has dropped from a roughly 500,000 annual inflow a decade ago to zero in the past three years. Mexico's rising economic prospects and declining population growth suggest that shift may be for keeps. Now is an ideal time to redress the status of the 11m undocumented Hispanics in the US. Enough Republicans have signed up to the "pathway to citizenship" to suggest Washington may finally be about to grasp the nettle. It would be a big breakthrough at a time of increasingly dynamic US economic relations with Mexico. It would also help to put a floor under the low-wage portions of the US economy.

The other side of any package will be a deal to beef up security along the 2,000 mile US-Mexico border. Much of this may be superfluous. In the past four years, President Barack Obama's administration has stepped up security and increased deportations (which, at 1.5m is more than Messrs Bush and Clinton combined). The past success of Mr Obama's enforcement regime has helped to improve the climate in Washington to agree on a 10-year pathway to citizenship. So far, few Republicans have cried "amnesty". In addition, the growing violence of the Mexican drugs cartels is justifying the call for tougher US security. In the past few years, it

Paso, the Texan border town, has gone from being one of the least safe US cities to being one of its safest. This is a gain worth consolidating.

The emerging bill also has potential weaknesses, however. This weekend's reported deal between the AFL-CIO, the largest US union, and the US Chamber of Commerce, on a US guest worker visa programme may have cleared the largest hurdle to a deal among the group of eight. But it looks to have been shoddily drafted. They agreed to an annual ceiling of just 200,000 guest workers and a floor of 20,000. Even the higher figure is a bagatelle in a labour force of nearly 150m. Clearly the AFL-CIO got the better of the negotiation.

There is also concern the so-called "economic visas" for high-

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skilled workers will continue to be channelled through the bureaucratic HIB system. It would be far preferable for the US to issue more green cards than to lift the HIB quota, which is stuck at 65,000 a year. It would also be a plus if the bill included automatic visas for foreign students graduating in science and engineering. Such a move would boost US innovation. Neither measure is yet assured.

Ultimately, however, the bill's fate will rest on the state of Republican politics. A large share of House Republicans will oppose any bill that smacks of amnesty for illegal immigrants. For it to pass, John Boehner, the speaker, will thus have to persuade some of his colleagues to vote with the Democrats, which would risk a Republican civil war. Mr Boehner knows the GOP must make peace with the Hispanic vote for its own electoral survival. But he will need to show statesmanship to help get it there.

LETTERS

The most ill-conceived reform of immigration law in US history

recent shifts in the US jobs market that "plunge the American middle-class deeper into crisis".

In 1990 the US Congress appointed a bipartisan Commission on Immigration Reform, which engaged the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a comprehensive

investigation of the costs and benefits of large-scale immigration. In 1997 the commission reported that legal immigration should be reduced from more than 900,000 per annum to 550,000, that the US had

no need for a new guest worker programme, and that granting a mass amnesty to illegal aliens would create more problems than it would solve. Is it reasonable for the

American people to cast aside these recommendations, which proceeded from years of expert analysis and public hearings, in favour of virtually opposite

recommendations cobbled together in a matter of weeks by eight politicians working behind closed doors with a swarm of immigration lobbyists?

William W. Chisp, Member, Board of Directors, Center for Immigration Studies, Washington, DC, US

among non-Hispanic whites". It is obvious from this side of the Atlantic, if not from yours, that the Republican party establishment, financially beholden to business interests, has always favoured mass immigration as a covert means of suppressing wages. The party's

showing among Latino voters in 2012 (only four points lower than 2008) is nothing more than the establishment's excuse ("the Hispanics made us do it") to the party's socially conservative base

for their eager acquiescence in President Barack Obama's immigration agenda. Finally, you express "concern" that the "gang of eight" bill may not include "automatic visas for

foreign students graduating in science and engineering. Why so, given that the number of US graduates in science, technology, medicine and engineering, as forecast by the US Department of Education, will greatly exceed the number of

new jobs in those fields, as forecast by the US Department of Labor? Your editorial enthusiasm for importing foreign college graduates is an ironic contrast to the front-page report in the same edition on

You say that granting Imm undocumented aliens a "pathway to citizenship" would "put a floor under the low-wage portions of the US economy". Yet the US economy, in the face of low-wage competition from China and other emerging economies, has for decades

experienced a net loss of high-wage jobs in the production of internationally traded goods and services. Sectors of the US economy that depend on non-tradable services, such as construction, cleaning and food service, are relatively immune

from such competition, yet most undocumented aliens work in those very sectors. How do the "low-wage" portions of the US economy benefit by having to compete with millions of foreign workers at home as well

as abroad? You say that "the GOP must make peace with the Hispanic vote for its own electoral survival". Yet, a peer-reviewed report in the latest edition of Social Sciences Quarterly "found no evidence that incumbent Republicans could increase their share of the Latino vote by

embracing less restrictive immigration policies", but that "doing so may cost them votes

From Mr William W. Chisp

Sir, Your endorsement of an "overhaul" of US immigration law manages in two columns to advance nearly every fallacy that stands behind the most ill-conceived immigration legislation in my country's history ("US immigration policy reform", editorial April 2).

You say that the annual inflow of illegal immigrants from Mexico has dropped "to zero" since the 2007 recession, making it the "ideal time" to redress the status of "the Imm undocumented Hispanics". For the record, fewer than 8m of the

undocumented population is Hispanic and fewer than 6m are Mexican. Moreover, the "zero" to which you refer is the net inflow of illegal Mexican migrants during 2005-10, as calculated by the Pew Hispanic Center. During the Great Recession of 2007-09, the gross inflow of more than 200,000 per annum was offset by an equivalent gross outflow. However, if the "gang of eight" senators succeed in granting

permanent residence to every undocumented Mexican, the gross outflow will drop nearly to zero, and the gross inflow will become the net inflow.



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