

The big catch in Trump's 'Dreamers' plan: A bid to restrict legal immigration

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At first glance, it looks like a generous offer: a pathway to citizenship for 1.8 million "Dreamers" brought to the United States illegally as children.

But there's a catch. A big one.

U.S. President Donald Trump strode back to the centre of the immigration debate on Thursday with the release of his administration's plan to resolve the continuing clash over the fate of the Dreamers.

The White House endorsed a path to citizenship over 10 to 12 years. In exchange, it proposed an enormous outlay – \$25-billion (U.S.) – for a border wall and an aggressive crackdown on unauthorized immigrants. Democrats dislike those ideas, but believe they could strike a deal for a smaller amount of funding.

Yet it is the third element of the White House plan that is the most telling – and the most inflammatory. Mr. Trump wants to drastically limit the ability of U.S. citizens and permanent residents to sponsor their relatives to immigrate to the country. Under his plan, only spouses and minors would be able to come.

The demand points to something important about this White House, something that differentiates it from every prior Republican administration in recent memory. It is not simply concerned with illegal immigration but also seeks to restrict legal immigration – and now it wants to use the predicament of the Dreamers in order to achieve that goal.

At the World Economic Forum on Friday, Mr. Trump told attendees that the American immigration system was "stuck in the past." The current family reunification mechanisms must be "replaced" with a system "that selects new arrivals based on their ability to contribute to our economy, to support themselves financially, and to strengthen our country," Mr. Trump said.

Of course, as part of that process, the White House wants a major reduction in legal immigration. If the administration is intent on sticking to that demand, its plan is "dead on arrival," said David Bier, an immigration analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. The proposed changes to family-based sponsorship would ultimately lower legal immigration to the

U.S. by four million people a decade, he said. Democrats are "not going to play this game where you're playing different immigrant groups against each other."

Indeed, immigration activists reacted with fury to the proposal, saying the White House was attempting to alter a fundamental tenet of the American immigration system.

"They think that by offering up a spoonful of sugar – relief for Dreamers – they can get Congress and the American people to swallow the bitter medicine of radical nativism," Frank Sharry, executive director of the advocacy group America's Voice, said in a statement. "We are going to fight this tooth and nail."

Of course, some Republicans were not exactly pleased by Mr. Trump's proposal, either. For years, the conservative wing of the party has attacked anything construed as "amnesty" – a reprieve for immigrants who entered the country illegally. Allowing Dreamers a path toward citizenship would fall into that category.

Breitbart News, the right-wing website, immediately dubbed the President's plan "Don's Amnesty Bonanza."

Michael Needham, chief executive of Heritage Action, a key conservative advocacy group, also used the "A" word to characterize the Trump administration's proposal. "Amnesty comes in many forms, but it seems they all eventually grow in size and scope," Mr. Needham said in a statement. Such a plan risks "opening Pandora's box... [and] should be a non-starter."

On Thursday, Senator Ted Cruz, a Republican from Texas, echoed that view.

"I do not believe we should be granting a path to citizenship to anybody here illegally," he said. "Doing so is inconsistent with the promises we made to the men and women who elected us."

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking for lawmakers to find some kind of compromise. On Monday, senators reached a deal to end a three-day government shutdown sparked by differences over immigration. Democrats stepped back from their demand that Congress find an immediate solution for the Dreamers as part of a broader spending package. In exchange, the Republican leadership in the Senate promised to hold a debate on an immigration bill by Feb. 8.

What bill they will take up remains unclear. Some lawmakers believe the only way forward is to narrow the scope of the debate, rather than using the issue of the Dreamers as a vehicle to achieve other changes in immigration policy. Such a solution might pair some border security measures with a version of the DREAM Act – the piece of legislation which originally gave the group their moniker and aimed to legalize their status, but has never been enacted.

Mr. Trump's own convictions on this topic are a moving target. Earlier this month, he spoke about Dreamers in conciliatory terms and promised to support whatever members of Congress approved. Two days later, he torpedoed a bipartisan deal reached by a group of senators in a meeting where he reportedly used a vulgarity to refer to African nations.

Mr. Trump set off the current clash in September of last year when he cancelled an Obama-era program known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. The program allowed immigrants

brought to the U.S. illegally as children to apply for temporary work permits and protection from deportation. Last year, about 700,000 people held such protections. As a result of Mr. Trump's decision, by the end of 2018, nearly half of them could be at risk of deportation.