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Republicans praise ‘dreamers’ publicly — but want them to live under permanent suspicion

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In a meeting with congressional leaders a few weeks ago, President Trump famously said he wanted a DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) “bill of love.” Of course, he said a lot of things at that meeting that he didn’t back up. But just this week, Trump said he is open to a path to citizenship for “dreamers” in 10 to 12 years. Last year, dreamer Angelica Villalobos asked House Speaker Paul D. Ryan (R-Wis.) whether she should fear being deported once the new administration took over. He told her she did not, adding “I hope your future is here.” She’s back in the news this week, challenging Ryan on his promise.

Publicly, Republicans tend to say nice things about dreamers. These, remember, are young adults who were brought to the United States as children. They must be educated and of “good moral character,” meaning they can’t have committed a serious crime. To participate in the program, they volunteered their names, status and contact information to the government. They’re now in a kind of limbo, unsure if Trump and the Congress will cut a deal for them, or if they’ll be deported back to a country they’ve never known.

The reason Republicans say nice things about dreamers in public is that they’re an incredibly sympathetic group. And they have the support of the public. Polls have consistently shown that majorities between 65 percent and 85 percent support keeping the dreamers here in the United States, either through permanent resident status or via some pathway to citizenship. But hard-line immigration hawks do not. Hawks such as White House adviser Stephen Miller, who has been hating immigrants since high school, and Rep. Steve King (R-Iowa), who — let’s face it — is an unapologetic bigot, don’t see dreamers as the public does. If they can’t deport them, they’re at least determined to use the dreamers as a bargaining chip to impose severe restrictions on *legal* immigration, slash refugee quotas and increase the percentage of immigrants from, as Trump infamously put it, countries like Norway, as opposed to Mexico, Haiti or Nigeria. Trump budget director Mick Mulvaney put it pretty bluntly this week. When asked what Trump’s ideal policy on dreamers would look like, Mulvaney responded that it “depends on what we get in exchange.” These aren’t people with lives, hopes, dreams and fears. They’re merely chits the White House could use to whiten up the immigration pool.

And so while Trump, Ryan and other GOP leaders praise the dreamers on camera, when it comes to crafting legislation, it’s the hard-liners who take over. A great example is the Securing America’s Future Act, a GOP DACA bill in the House that apparently has White House support. The bill would indeed grant dreamers a legal, non-immigrant status, which they could renew in perpetuity. That’s great. But the Cato Institute’s David Bier found some nasty other provisions buried in the 414-page bill. For example, the bill would make it nearly impossible for

refugees to even apply for asylum unless they've already secured an attorney in the United States. For most people fleeing war zones or political persecution, that just isn't an option. It would also mandate the most severe cuts to *legal* immigration in nearly a century.

But here's the nugget Bier found that's most outrageous:

The worst enforcement provision is criminalizing simply being in the United States without status or violating any aspect of *civil* immigration law (p. 170). This would turn millions of unauthorized immigrants into criminals overnight. It would also criminalize legal immigrants who fail to update their addresses, carry their green card with them at all times, or otherwise abide by the million inane regulations that Congress imposes on them.

Instant criminalization of *millions* of people. That's a lot of new customers for those privatized immigration detention centers. (The private prison industry, incidentally, donated handsomely to Trump's campaign and inauguration. Just a coincidence, I'm sure.) And then there's this, which says all we need to know about what the bill's sponsors really think of dreamers:

Take, for example, the status provided to Dreamers in this bill. It requires them to maintain an annual income of at least 125 percent of the poverty line (p. 396). If they fall below that level for 90 days—not only are they subject to deportation again—they would be *criminals*. This bill literally criminalizes poverty among Dreamers.

Bier elaborates on this provision in a subsequent post.

Under this bill, the law wouldn't view dreamers as prospective U.S. citizens. It wouldn't view them productive members of society. Under this bill, the state would perpetually be looking over every dreamer's shoulder. It's perpetual probation. Should they be struck down by illness or an accident, encounter a bad boss, take the wrong job or experience some other sort of bad luck, they risk not only deportation but *criminal prosecution*.

Immigrants in general, and dreamers in particular, contribute far more to the economy than they take from it. No matter. It's clear that this bill's sponsors and supporters see dreamers no differently from the dehumanizing caricature that hard-line immigration opponents project of immigrants generally: In the end, they're just foreigners in search of handouts. No matter how educated, how credentialed, how ambitious, they'll never shake that suspicion. This bill would codify that suspicion into law. And again, dreamers wouldn't even need to *try* to obtain public assistance to bring the law down upon them. Simply being poor for a short period of time would be enough.

Dreamers were brought here at a young age, and not of their own volition. Because of their status, they've lived precariously yet managed to avoid trouble. They've educated themselves. Most have entered the workforce. They then trusted our goodwill when they volunteered for the DACA program. They agreed to let the government know who they were. They tried to get right with the law, despite the law's indifference to their history. Now they watch and wait as politicians treat them like a stack of poker chips.

Meanwhile, Trump and the Republicans attempt to earn public goodwill by praising these young people in public, while in private they push legislation that would, for their rest of their lives, tell them that the United States will allow them to remain here, but only begrudgingly, and only if they agree to live under a permanent cloud of suspicion.

