



Immigration debate reverses D.C. politics

By: Neil Munro – May 24, 2013

The immigration debate is shredding D.C.'s typical political coalitions, causing progressives, libertarians and business interests to briefly ally against a virtual coalition of conservatives and old-style liberals.

The shift is highlighted by Alabama Sen. Jeff Sessions, a Republican who has argued against the far-reaching Senate bill by using research from the conservative Heritage Foundation and the union-backed Economic Policy Institute, plus a left-wing Harvard economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman.

"I don't think it is any wonder the Communications Workers of America have written us to oppose this [bill]," Sessions said recently during a committee debate over the bill.

"I expect them to defend the American worker. They have been rather lax on it, in my opinion," said Sessions, who has an 11 percent lifetime vote-rating from the AFL-CIO.

Sessions also aimed his message at university-educated youth, who lean Democratic at the ballot box. "I don't know if you've talked to your college grads and been to college graduation ceremonies recently, but a lot of those kids are wondering where they're going to get a job," he warned his Senate colleagues.

And he landed several jabs at the business groups that are backing the bill's expanded guest-worker program. "Should our immigration policy serve the national interest or the special interest of certain companies?" he said.

In contrast, the bill's backers have downplayed their support among ethnic lobbies and progressives, and have boosted their outreach to GOP Senators by highlighting support from billionaire capitalists and their wives, high-profit companies seeking more guest-workers, the CATO Institute's libertarian analysts, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and even Grover Norquist, who has long been a hate-figure on the left for his opposition to taxes.

The ideological realignment contrast was noted with amusement by Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy, the Democratic chairman of the Senate's judiciary committee, who playfully offered Sessions a seat on the Democratic side of the table.

“The Senator from Alabama has quoted with approval a Harvard professor [George Borjas], Paul Krugman of the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Atlantic [magazine]. Welcome home!,” said Leahy.

The exchange came during the committee’s rushed mark-up of the 876-page immigration bill.

The political divide doesn’t “divide neatly along traditional party lines, Republican vs. Democratic ... instead, the divide is populist vs. elite,” said Ron Hira, an associate professor at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and an analyst for the left-of-center Economic Policy Institute.

Hira’s research was cited numerous times by Sessions during the mark-up meetings.

The bill’s advocates have a very different perspective.

Sessions’ opposition to the far-reaching bill is fueled by “perceptions of political advantage and nativism,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an pro-bill advocate at the Cato Institute. “Anti-reform conservatives and Republicans seem to think that more people are a burden and will divide a fixed economic pie into smaller slices, which contradicts 90 years of conservative free-market talking points,” he said.

Session’s populist opposition to the business-backed bill prompts very passionate response from the progressive and libertarian activists who usually are on rival sides of political debates.

Washington Post progressive columnist Dana Milbank suggested Sessions’ opposition is fuel by racism.

“Not since George Wallace, perhaps, has an Alabamian taken as passionate a stand for a lost cause as the one Jeff Sessions is taking now ... [Leahy] held a voice vote [and] the only audible ‘no’ came from the man from Alabama,” he wrote in a May 20 column.

Milbank’s column included no evidence that Sessions actually stereotypes people by their skin-color or birthplace.

Milbank’s progressive race-baiting has been complemented by jeering from Jennifer Rubin, author of the Washington Post’s “Right Turn” column.

She sniped at Sessions in a May 14 column that urged readers to ignore “squawking from anti-reform groups and immigration exclusionists,” On May 7, she declared Sessions was a member of “the ‘not over my dead body’ crowd,” in contrast to “mainstream conservatives.”

Ezra Klein, the Washington Post’s primary progressive blogger, reconciled the interests of rival progressive and business advocates in an April 22 column.

Klein first dismissed populist opposition to large-scale immigration by saying that amnesty would reduce — but not eliminate — wage-competition between illegal workers and Americans. He downplayed arguments about increased welfare spending by

endorsing the prediction by Doug Holtz-Eakin, the libertarian-leaning economist who heads the business-backed American Action Forum, that the immigration bill would boost the economy by 1 percent in 10 years.

He wrapped up his pro-amnesty argument by reassuring other progressives saying the bill will be good for foreigners.

The “benefits to immigrants themselves are, I think, the strongest argument in favor of immigration reform,” he said. “Immigrants are also low-wage laborers, and when they come here, their wages skyrocket — which leads to better lives for them and their families back home,” he said.

Klein’s merger of progressive and business priorities echoes a novel class-based split in the mostly populist AFL-CIO.

The federation of unions has a large blue-collar membership that believes in old-style liberal solidarity and wealth-redistribution, plus a smaller, university-trained progressive leadership that supports the society-splitting ideology of diversity.

Faced with the immigration issue, the AFL-CIO is now pushing a fractured two-track policy.

It is endorsing increased job-competition for its blue-collar members by backing the bill’s progressive proposal to amnesty 11 million illegal immigrants, which would get them on track to the ballot boxes in the next decade.

It also boosting job-protections for university-educated software experts who are the professional peers of the unions’ leadership.

“The labor movement has no higher priority in 2013 than a workable immigration system that will allow 11 million aspiring Americans to become citizens,” said a May 21 statement signed by AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka.

But software workers need to be protected, said Trumka.

“If the hard work of America’s tech workers is ever to pay off, we need to craft policy that benefits the people who actually write code, rather than just rewarding industry honchos who write checks to politicians,” said the statement.

“Tech tycoons like Larry Ellison and Mark Zuckerberg have gotten rich while wages in the technology sector have stagnated,” said Trumka, echoing Sessions’s mark-up speeches.

“Our goal should be an America in which our young tech workers can pay off their student loans, not one in which Larry Ellison can build ever more extravagant yachts,” said Trumka, who shook hands with Grover Norquist during a Senate press event on April 18 to announce the formal introduction of the bill.

“It’s no surprise that there is overlap” between Trumka and Sessions, said David Leopold, chief counsel at the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

“Some of the concerns of labor, especially about protecting the jobs and wages of US workers, are going to be trumpeted by Sessions and others whose purpose is to kill the bill,” said Leopold.

“The elites dominate both parties,” countered Hira.

“There isn’t much daylight between the Obama Administration and the George W. Bush Administration on issues like immigration and outsourcing,” he added.

That elite alliance may prompt a large-scale political realignment that would establish “a right-left coalition around populist issues,” said Hira.

The public’s growing concerns can be seen and felt in the “reader picks” comments to news articles about graduate-level outsourcing and immigration, he said.

“Americans [are] lamenting that their government is beholden to the corporate class [and] the real question is whether any smart politicians see an opportunity here,” Hira said.