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Surprise right-winger leads pro-Obama push against most Republicans as the Boston bombing and Social Security fears add fuel to America's immigration debate

By: David Martosko – April 22, 2013

Conservative crusader Grover Norquist argues for immigration bill as most Republicans run for cover

Mysterious lobbyist at the center of alliance between Norquist and libertarian Cato Institute

GOP Sens. Graham and Rubio claim Boston bombers wouldn't have had it any easier under Obama-supported immigration reform plan

Conservative blog outed communications effort, drew think-tank's barbs

It wasn't too long ago that the idea of Republicans vocally supporting a long-term citizenship outlook for oft-derided 'illegals' would have send pundits and editors scrambling to be sure it wasn't April Fool's Day.

Not anymore.

And if anti-immigration conservatives thought the April 15 Boston Marathon bombings would derail talk in Washington of immigration reform, they didn't count on Grover Norquist, Marco Rubio, Lindsey Graham, the Cato Institute, or an obscure Republican lobbyist named Peggy Ellis.

While Ellis and Rubio aren't talking, both Cato and Americans for Tax Reform - Norquist's group - say it shouldn't shock anyone that they favor a quasi-amnesty for 11 million illegal immigrants.

Cato, the libertarian think-tank, is an unabashed supporter of liberalizing immigration law but typically has limited influence among red-meat-eating Republican policymakers. Norquist, the Republican anti-tax crusader, has long been known in Washington for being - as one think-tank lobbyist who requested anonymity put it to MailOnline on Monday - 'squishy on the immigration issue, in a way that makes lots of right-wingers nervous.'

That squishiness, it seems, is driving Republican in-fighting and casting Norquist as he black sheep in an increasingly immigration-aimless GOP.

Rubio, a Florida senator whose parents escaped Cuba's regime, is the leading GOP light on a bipartisan plan to shift America's immigration frame in the direction of granting gradual amnesties to illegal immigrants. Rubio, Arizona Sen. John McCain, and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham have raised hackles among party loyalists for reaching compromises some see as a prelude to runaway amnesty.

Graham is telling TV audiences that the bombing should increase demands for an organized, government-led mainstreaming of immigrants without documents. He said on CNN Sunday that the Boston bombing was another reason to 'bring all of the 11 million' illegal immigrants living in the U.S. 'out of the shadows and find out who they are.'

And Rubio, through the mysterious lobbyist and would-be lever-puller Peggy Ellis, endorsed a set of emailed talking points that attempted to undo any damage the Boston bombing may have done to pro-immigration efforts.

Ellis's email, titled 'Talkers from Rubio, was in part a result of working during the previous days with Cato and Americans for Tax Reform. 'Rubio talking points re: Boston terrorists vis a vis immigration reform' was its headline.

'These terrorists came here under the existing system, the one opponents of reform want to leave in place,' the first message point said, followed by the observation that the terrorist brothers from Chechnya 'didn't cross the border' illegally to enter the United States.

'The reason we know who they are is because they were here legally,' Rubio's talking points added. 'If they were here illegally, living in the shadows, it would have made them much harder to investigate. The fact is that today there are 11 million people already in this country and we don't know who they are, why they're here, and what they're doing. That is not only an economic problem, it's a huge national security problem as well.'

Ellis, who sent the email to a coalition of groups on the right side of the political spectrum, was briefly a Cato lobbyist - 'she was here for a few blinks of an eye,' one Cato employee told MailOnline - and has also lobbied on immigration issues for Nueva Esperanza, a Philadelphia-based immigrants' rights group.

She is also a former top lobbyist at the Republican National Committee, placing her at the center of a small Republican movement to break away from the party's historic opposition to full citizenship for illegal immigrants.

Ellis's brief cameo in the immigration chronicle of 2013 as a go-between - she's a minor enough figure to make publishable photographs impossible to find - is an example of the obscure centers of gravity now found in a debate where strange bedfellows have become the norm.

The conservative blog Breitbart.com has published excerpts of emails between Ellis and immigration policy leaders at both Cato and Americans for Tax Reform, along with Ellis's talking-points missive.

Those messages, which appeared on the Breitbart 'Big Government' website, seem to

outline a plan to help push the so-called 'Gang Of Eight' immigration bill through Congress by crafting testimony from Norquist in a way that sidesteps the Boston massacre while asking other groups to carry messages about the attacks that favor the 'Gang Of Eight' legislation.

Norquist deputy Josh Culling had choice words for the Breitbart online publishing empire and its choice of a headline that claimed his group 'use[d] the Boston terror attacks' to push immigration reform.

'This is a false, provocative, and disgusting headline that is not at all supported by the story itself,' he sniped. 'To suggest that we are exploiting the tragedy in Boston is the opposite of the truth.'

The Breitbart News Network sniped back. 'The emails speak for themselves,' the company told MailOnline.

'Those involved could have taken the moral high ground and resisted any politics in the discussion. Instead they plotted to spin events in favor of the immigration bill.'

One of the emails, sent April 18, shows Culling asking Ellis for help with testimony that his boss is set to deliver in a Senate hearing Monday afternoon.

'I need to push on this,' Culling wrote, referring to questions about how an influx of new U.S. citizens would affect the already-strained Social Security system.

'[T]his is the one question GGN [Grover Glenn Norquist] may get when testifying that I don't have a strong answer to. Can you see if your old boss at Cato can help?'

'Will do. ... I'm happy to help w Grover's testimony. ... will work on n [sic] the SS stuff first.'

Ellis sought help from Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy wonk at Cato. He responded that he was 'meeting with Josh [Culling] later today about this and already sent him a memo pertaining to it. The Boston thing could derail this big time.'

Former South Carolina Sen. Jim DeMint, who now leads the influential right-wing Heritage Foundation, argued in a [USA Today](#) op-ed on April 17 that creating millions of new citizens will ultimately require a bank-breaking explosion of government entitlements.

'As soon as any of the nearly 11 million unauthorized immigrants are given legal status, the political fight will turn to speeding their transition to citizenship and promises of a full array of federal benefits,' he wrote.

Ultimately, Norquist submitted testimony to the Senate Judiciary Committee that focused on the benefits of flexible labor opportunities as government opens up the market to workers who were previously off the radar.

'Allowing undocumented workers to move from job to job, travel easily and safely, search out and interview for different jobs in different sectors and locations would greatly increase their productivity,' Norquist will say, according to his prepared remarks, 'and

they would become greater contributors to their own well-being and the wealth of our nation.'

Overall, Norquist's group favors enlarging the tax base by adding new taxpayers, rather than the increase of income tax rates for everyone. But his testimony doesn't directly address the idea of what will happen when new citizens retire by the millions.

Instead he criticizes other Republicans by saying they have failed to embrace a 'dynamic' approach to predicting what a pro-immigrant America will look like a generation from now.

Those conservatives are 'exaggerating public benefit costs', predicting 'impossible levels of immigrant use,' 'assuming immigrant wages will remain stagnant,' and 'conceding the size of the current welfare state, rather than working to reform it.'

A Cato Institute insider told MailOnline on background that its alliance with Norquist's group isn't a big deal, but conceded that it's odd to find the conservative firebrand carrying water for libertarians.

Culling, the Americans for Tax Reform government affairs expert, told MailOnline much the same thing through a spokesman.

'It is no secret that ATR is supportive of the current immigration reform effort,' he said. 'It is also no secret that we are working with other conservatives who support the bill.' Ellis didn't respond to emailed questions. Rubio's press secretary offered no comment.