

Obama to push economic case for immigration reform

By Anna Fiefield – July 10th, 2013

President Barack Obama will on Wednesday argue that comprehensive immigration reform will boost the US economy, as he attempts to deliver a jolt to legislative efforts that are increasingly looking like they will be dead on arrival.

Although the Senate passed a bill last month that would provide 11m illegal immigrants with a pathway to citizenship and tighten security on the southern border, analysts are becoming gloomier by the day about efforts in the House of Representatives.

All 234 House Republicans are due at a meeting on immigration reform on Capitol Hill on Wednesday, in a forum aimed at letting lawmakers air their concerns about the issue. Separately, Mr Obama is due to meet on Wednesday with the Democrat-dominated Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

This comes as the Republican-controlled House prepares to vote on a series of immigration-related bills in July.

Immigration reform is a difficult issue for many Republicans as while Hispanics are the fastest growing part of the electorate, voters in conservative districts would likely punish any Republican lawmaker who votes for “amnesty” for unauthorised immigrants.

In an effort to make the economic case for immigration reform – addressing a key Republican concern – the White House will on Wednesday release a report entitled “The Economic Benefits of Fixing Our Broken Immigration System”.

But the report contains little new information. Instead, it relies on the Congressional Budget Office estimates released a month ago, before the Senate bill was passed.

“Today, too many employers game the system by hiring undocumented workers and there are 11m people living and working in the shadow economy,” the White House said in a statement accompanying the report. “Neither is good for the economy or the country. It is time to fix our broken immigration system.”

Mr Obama is fond of touting the immigrants who have gone on to found some of the US’s most successful companies, such as Sergey Brin of Google, to make his case that immigrants are highly entrepreneurial.

The White House also stresses in the report that immigration reform will be good for American workers because it will boost productivity – and therefore wages – and will bring undocumented workers into the legal economy, stopping them from undercutting native-born workers.

Economists affiliated with the Republican party – from former Bush administration CBO director Doug Holtz-Eakin to the libertarian Cato Institute – have been making the case for months that immigration reform would be good for the US's lacklustre economy. But their arguments have done little, if anything, to sway sceptical Republican lawmakers.

Many apparently fear primary challenges ahead of next year's congressional elections if they support immigration reform, which remains unpopular in the more conservative factions of the party.

John Boehner, the Republican speaker of the House, has repeatedly said that he will not bring the Senate bill up for a vote in the lower chamber but will instead put forward a series of smaller bills. This would enable Republicans to vote for the components they like, such as border security, while voting against the more unpalatable parts, chief among them the pathway to citizenship.

Given these statements, and the fact that Republican opposition seems to be growing stronger by the day, many analysts predict the legislative efforts will die in conference, where the Senate and House versions are supposed to be reconciled.

In a rare joint editorial published this week, influential conservatives Bill Kristol of The Weekly Standard and Rich Lowry of the National Review urged Republicans to “kill” the Senate bill.

“[The] bill, passed out of the Senate, is a comprehensive mistake. House Republicans should kill it without reservation,” they wrote. “The enforcement provisions are riddled with exceptions, loopholes, and waivers. Every indication is that they are for show and will be disregarded, just as prior notional requirements to build a fence or an entry/exit visa system have been.”

The House is expected to pass a series of smaller bills this month, with the border security bill due to come up for a vote next week before other relatively easy measures such as giving more visas to highly skilled workers.

“This meeting is likely to serve as a useful compass on a future timeframe for House action this summer and fall,” Chris Krueger, an analyst at Guggenheim Partners, wrote in a research note this week. He estimated a 60 per cent probability that comprehensive immigration reforms would be signed into law by the end of the year.