

Statement of Chairman Patrick Leahy
“Building an Immigration System Worthy of American Values”
Hearing Before the Senate Judiciary Committee
March 20, 2013

Since the beginning of this Congress, I have tried to make comprehensive immigration reform our top legislative priority in the Senate Judiciary Committee. In January at Georgetown University Law Center, I outlined my expectation that comprehensive immigration reform would be the matter to which the Judiciary Committee would devote itself this spring and announced an early hearing to highlight the national discussion. I followed through with that important hearing, at which Secretary Napolitano testified, more than a month ago. This week, Senator Hirono and Senator Coons are chairing two more hearings regarding comprehensive immigration reform.

For months I have urged the President to send his proposal for comprehensive immigration reform to the Senate. I understand he has delayed releasing it at the request of a few Senators who are engaged in secret, closed door discussions on their own proposal and who committed to completing it by the beginning of March. That deadline and others have come and gone.

I have said since the beginning of the year that I was looking forward to seeing principles turned into legislation. I am encouraged that after two resounding presidential defeats, some Republican politicians are concerned enough about the growing Hispanic voting population that they are abandoning their former demagoguery and coming to the table. In what is being called its “autopsy” of the last election, the Republican National Committee wrote that “Hispanic voters tell us our Party’s position on immigration has become a litmus test, measuring whether we are meeting them with a welcome mat or a closed door.” After slamming the door on our efforts for comprehensive immigration reform during the Bush administration, I welcome Republicans to this effort. While I still worry that too many continue to oppose a straightforward pathway to citizenship, that is a discussion we need to have out in the open, in front of the American people.

Without legislative language, there is nothing for the Judiciary Committee to consider this week at our mark up. The upcoming recess period would have allowed all Members of the Committee and the American people to review the legislation. Now that process and our work will be delayed at least a month.

I have favored an open and transparent process during which all 18 Senators serving on the Senate Judiciary Committee will have the opportunity to participate and to propose or oppose ideas for reform. The Majority Leader has agreed that we need regular order in the consideration of comprehensive immigration reform. This process will take time. It will not be easy. There will be strongly-held, differing points of view. Because we do not yet have legislative language to debate, the Senate Judiciary Committee will not be able to report a comprehensive immigration bill by the end of April, which was my goal.

Few topics are more fundamental to who and what we are as a Nation than immigration. Immigration throughout our history has been an ongoing source of renewal of our spirit, our creativity and our economic strength. Today’s immigration hearing is focused on the existing

immigration system and how, too often, it fails to ensure the due process rights of those seeking to come to our country. Almost two years ago, I chaired a related hearing entitled “Improving Efficiency and Ensuring Justice in the Immigration Court System.” I continue to believe that the challenges facing the immigration courts are not partisan or ideological. We all want courts to operate fairly and efficiently and serve the interests of justice. So any comprehensive reform to our immigration system must address the backlog and injustices occurring in our immigration courts.

I thank Senator Coons for chairing today’s hearing.

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