

REMARKS ON COMMONSENSE IMMIGRATION REFORM

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Thank you, Amy for that introduction.

And thank you to the Brookings Institution for having me here today, and for holding today's event.

I've worked on immigration policy in our nation's capital and around the country for over 25 years. But while this issue is discussed and often decided upon in Washington, the impacts of those discussions and decisions are felt in cities and towns across our country.

I know this from personal experience. I grew up in metropolitan Detroit, the daughter of immigrants from Bolivia, surrounded by communities populated with immigrants from around the world in search of the American dream. I started my career providing services to immigrants at NGOs in California and Chicago, and building coalitions that worked on issues of integration.

And when I started at the White House, before I became the Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, I served as the White House liaison to mayors and governors across the country.

In that role I worked closely with local leaders as they struggled to recover from the historic recession. Many of them, from both political parties, understood the integral role immigrants play in helping their cities innovate, grow the local economy, and getting through difficult economic times.

I can tell you that President Obama understands this as well.

As a U.S. Senator, and as a State Senator in Illinois, the President developed the view that immigration reform is not just the right thing to do. It's an economic imperative that impacts all sorts of communities and families in very tangible ways.

Two weeks ago, the White House released a report highlighting the economic benefits of the bipartisan immigration reform bill that passed the Senate – and the significant costs to our country and our economy if Congress fails to act. This report makes clear how high the stakes are in this debate.

Let me give you just some of the highlights.

- If Congress acts, we'd see a larger labor force, higher productivity, and more investments. Over the next two decades, our economy would grow by an additional 5.4% compared to the status quo.

- If Congress acts, real wages will rise, deficits will fall by \$850 billion, and our debt will shrink as a share of the economy.
- If Congress acts, the solvency of the Social Security Trust Fund will be extended by two years and the 75-year shortfall will be reduced by nearly half a trillion dollars.
- If Congress acts, the recovery of the housing market will be strengthened, thanks to stronger demand and higher prices for homes in neighborhoods hardest hit by the recession.
- If Congress acts, the Visa Waiver Program, new CBP officers, and the permanent authorization of the Corporation for Travel Promotion will provide significant boost to tourism and hospitality.

So yes, comprehensive immigration reform is a moral imperative and a security imperative. Yes, it's about basic fairness. But on top of all that, the economic costs of inaction are simply too high to delay.

And, since the focus of your discussion today is the impact of this debate on cities and metro areas, I should add that, if Congress acts, we can finally address challenges that cities have been facing as they grapple with the symptoms of our broken immigration system. Because the crux of the matter is that, while Congress and the federal government have the authority to set immigration law and enforce it, local governments live with the results of what Congress does and fails to do.

And because Congress has failed to address the broken immigration system for years, local governments wrestle with the challenges of large numbers of undocumented immigrants living and working in their communities. States and municipalities have faced these challenges in a variety of ways, from Arizona and Alabama's adoption of harsh laws that attempt to engage local law enforcement officials in immigration enforcement -- which is a federal function -- to states that have passed in-state tuition laws so that undocumented students have better access to college.

Local police forces wrestle with the challenge of building relationships in communities which are, by definition, living in fear of contact with the authorities, which makes it harder to encourage folks to come forward when a crime has been committed or a safety hazard emerges. School districts work to integrate children who struggle with the fear that their parents will be deported - research is showing, as you might expect, that this kind of anxiety interferes with success in school for these students.

While some state legislatures have responded to these challenges by passing laws which reflect a variety of approaches, the fact is that states can't regulate immigration -- that's the job of Congress -- and even if they could, we could hardly say that a patchwork of 50 different approaches is a rational immigration policy.

And that brings me to the current state of play here in Washington.

First of all, let me just say that I'm hopeful that June 27th, 2013 is a day that will go down in history. I was fortunate enough to be sitting in the gallery as the Senate passed S. 744, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity and Immigration Modernization Act.

That vote was the result of countless hours put in by an extremely dedicated, bipartisan group of Senators, their staff, and Administration staff providing technical support along the way. Nobody got everything they wanted, including the White House. But the final bill reflected President Obama's principles for commonsense immigration reform. It was consistent with our history as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. And when the time came to vote on that bill the Senate passed that bill with an overwhelming bipartisan majority – 68 to 32. [Just to put that in perspective, in last November's election, only two places --Utah and DC-- gave either candidate 68 percent of the vote.]

The reason this bill got so many votes is simple: it's a smart compromise, and it's good policy.

It creates a fair pathway for earned citizenship for the 11 million undocumented individuals living and working in our communities, a pathway that would require them to pass background checks, learn English, pay taxes and penalties, and go to the back of the line behind legal immigrants who have been caught in the limbo of immigration backlogs.

The bill would also create a new path to citizenship for agricultural workers who contribute to the agriculture industry. These immigrants play an integral role in the future of food security, and it is time we give them a pathway to citizenship.

The bill creates an expedited path for young immigrants known as DREAMers, immigrants brought to the U.S. as children, attended school, yet live in constant fear of deportation.

The bill also represents the best chance that our country has had in decades to modernize our legal immigration system. It builds on the administration's progress of strengthening border security and cracking down on employers that hire and exploit undocumented workers. It also creates a meaningful pathway to earned citizenship for undocumented immigrants, and modernizes the legal immigration system for families, workers, and employers.

Now, we know that the fight for immigration reform has never been easy. There were plenty of people who predicted we would never get this far. There's little question that the Senate bill or something very much like it would pass if the House got a chance to vote on it, but as the President said when the bill left the Senate – “now is the time when opponents will try their hardest to pull this bipartisan effort apart so they can stop commonsense reform from becoming a reality.”

So we've got work to do. But I believe that even in today's Washington, the coalition calling for action is too broad and deep and forceful to ignore.

If we keep our sense of urgency and our sense of purpose, I believe Congress will listen to a clear majority of Americans.

They'll listen to both the business community, labor movement – the Chamber of Commerce and the SEIU.

They'll listen to leaders from across the spectrum: faith communities, law enforcement, state and local governments, and the civil rights movement.

They'll listen to leading voices in both parties. Just the other day David Plouffe – the architect of the Obama presidential campaign, and Steve Schmidt, senior adviser to the 2008 McCain campaign – wrote a joint OpEd with a less than vague title: “Pass the immigration bill”?

But let me leave you with this – we are engaging the clear majority of Americans who support reform, and telling them that now is not the time to let up. It's the time to speak up. It's the time to make sure that everyone, not just in this city but around the country, knows what's at stake. To make it clear to families from all backgrounds and all parts of the country why this matters to them.

I came to this work because families like mine are still working hard for their piece of the American dream. We've done so much to help put that dream within each. We have come too far to quit now. I won't quit. President Obama won't quit. And with the hard work of an unprecedentedly broad coalition, and voices from around the country, we can get this done. Thank you.