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EDITORIAL

Progress on Immigration

Two important words to remember in the immigration debate in Congress are “triggers” and “touchback.” During last year’s ill-fated wrangling, the terms made the supporters of comprehensive reform bristle. The first refers to tough border-security benchmarks that the nation would have to meet before other parts of reform would kick in. The second refers to the requirement that illegal immigrants leave the country — even if only touching down briefly over the border — before re-entering on a legal footing.

Opponents of both concepts saw them as ways to sabotage a good bill. Triggers were seen as a way to start right away on the popular fence-building and other border-sealing measures sought by Republicans while delaying, possibly forever, the more humane elements of reform: a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants and temporary visas for new workers. The touchback provision was seen as just another unnecessary hurdle for immigrants, proposed to satisfy hard-liners.

The good news is that in this year’s debate, triggers and touchback have become potential areas of compromise. It remains true that maliciously devised triggers can be too onerous, but as The Wall Street Journal reported, Democrats are now saying that they are open to well-written trigger provisions, since that could give a bill broader support among Republicans. Reassuring Americans that border security is improving is reasonable, as long as achieving the benchmarks is not the sole and ultimate aim. Republican leaders, to their credit, have backed away from the narrow, enforcement-only approach that disgraced their efforts last year.

Triggers and touchback have already been conceded by the supporters of comprehensive reform; a bill in the House, the Strive Act, sponsored by Representatives Jeff Flake and Luis Gutierrez, would require immigrants to leave the country and return within a six-year span. It’s not ideal, but if a touchback provision is manageable and reassures people that illegal immigrants are indeed going to the back of the line, then it will be defensible.

The possible breaking of the stalemate was only part of the good news in recent days. The other part came in the form of research showing Americans way ahead of the hard right on immigration reform. The USA Today/Gallup poll found that 78 percent favored earned citizenship.

If passion and conviction were all it took to make good legislation, this problem would have been solved long ago. But progress on an issue this difficult requires hard compromises. With the 2008 presidential election barreling up like a semi — objects in mirror are closer than they appear — time pressures have

focused people's attention. Difficult details still need to be worked out, such as whether illegal workers will have to wait years for the current immigration backlog to clear before getting on a citizenship path, and whether family members will be excluded. But the outlines of a bipartisan deal are becoming clearer.

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