

Immigration advocates promise to put 'muscle' behind reform push

By Cameron Joseph - 01/17/13 04:15 PM ET

Pro-immigration reform groups are revving up efforts to force leaders to tackle with legislation amid concerns the issue could get shoved to the sidelines amid other high-profile fights on Capitol Hill.

"We need some action," former Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, who served under former President George W. Bush, said Thursday.

"This is what happens when immigration reform is important, but it's not the number one issue. You can keep on sort of delaying it because you have to take care of the fiscal cliff, which now looks like it's going to be a fiscal stairway that goes all the way to the end of the term. ... And guns, I think that has surpassed immigration reform on priorities."

Gutierrez spoke on a panel of faith, law enforcement and business leaders organized by the pro-reform National Immigration Forum. For legislation to succeed, he said it must be the "number one priority for the president, for Congress, and that hasn't happened yet."

"I think it has to be lot more than just a couple of very nice sentences in the State of the Union address," he said.

Others expressed similar concerns.

Former U.S. Ambassador Johnny Young, who is now at the Conference of Catholic Bishops, said it was "incumbent on us as citizens, as members of groups, as advocates, as non-governmental organizations to keep the pressure on the president so that he remains focused on this issue."

To achieve that, many are gearing up for action.

Gutierrez, who helped Mitt Romney's campaign with Hispanic outreach, is teaming up with former Mitt Romney super-PAC head Charlie Spies to create a political action committee that will spend heavily to protect pro-reform Republicans from primary challenges.

He said he hoped that type of support would entice Republicans who believed in reform — but had so far remained silent because of worries about the GOP base's reaction — to come out in support of it.

"We expect to do this in the right way, in a big way and to have an impact," he said. "Because up to now it's been a lot of working the Hill, but we're going to have to put more muscle behind it."

Gutierrez said details are still being worked out about who else will be involved in the group, and whether they would just spend to protect current members or also target anti-reform Republicans. Details would be announced "very soon," he said.

That concern is growing with immigration reform proponents. Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.), a leading reform advocate on the left, told The Hill last week that he was similarly concerned about delay.

"We can't wait and wait and wait for immigration reform to get rolling," he said.

U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donohue said he was regularly talking to other pro-reform advocates, meeting over a recent breakfast with AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. He said the pro-reform groups needed to get together on broad principles, then push together for reform.

"We'll do it here in Washington and we'll do it around the country. We have thousands of state and local chambers around the country, we have 900 business associations from different industries that have representatives all around the country, we have millions of millions of people in our grassroots network," he said. "We'll put that all to work when the time is right. ... We need to build a consensus, get people ready to listen, and then we'll get out and advocate it in a very strong way."

Young said the Conference of Catholic Bishops had already begun a "postcard campaign" for congressmen, and would use its annual gathering of 800 Catholic leaders for a "door knock campaign" on Capitol Hill to advocate for the cause.

But differences emerged between the advocates.

Donohue said that a bill should offer a "path out of the shadows" for the 11 million or so undocumented immigrants in the U.S., but stopped short of advocating an immediate pathway to citizenship for them. Young then took to the podium to demand any bill

include a path to citizenship, leading Donohue to wryly say the issue often triggered a "passionate response" from those on both sides.

When Gutierrez said the approach favored by Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) of a series of a few smaller immigration bills is the best way forward, Donohue disagreed. He argued that would sap support for the more difficult measures in the package, a position held by President Obama and most Democrats, as well as some old-guard Republicans.

Donohue argued those were "process" concerns that would not scuttle legislation, but it's a major divide between the two sides on Capitol Hill.

The National Immigration Forum will join with more left-leaning and humanitarian pro-reform groups on Friday, including the Service Employees International Union and America's Voice, a group focused more on immigrants.

Donohue admitted that one major sticking point between his group and labor was what form a guest-worker program would take and how future immigration would be handled.

"If we can come to a resolution on these subjects you might see things move a lot more quickly," he said. "I'm not worried about whether we can get the votes in the House if we can get an agreement between labor and management and the faith-based people." Gutierrez admitted that without agreement on "strategic future [immigration] flow ... we're going to continue spinning our wheels."

But all agreed that advocates must push for Obama and Congress to act — and act fast.

Pointing out the last real reform push was in 2007, Gutierrez said "if we don't get this right this time we're probably going to have to wait another 5 years." He said it is "absolutely essential that this become a real issue of substance and not an issue of political theater to see who can get the upper hand."

<http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/277853-immigration-reform-proponents-insist-now-is-time-for-action>