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DeMint, Inglis hear strong views during Spartanburg visit

By JASON SPENCER, Staff Writer

Just as the definition of "is" plagued the Democrats in the 1990s, the definition of "amnesty" is on the verge of determining the legacy of the current GOP regime.

Two Republican congressmen - U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint and U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis - spent hours listening to largely conservative crowds at separate events Tuesday in Spartanburg. Each drew more than 100 people.

The main thing they heard was frustration.

Frustration that current laws aren't being enforced, frustration the problems with the immigration system have festered for two decades, frustration that employers of illegal immigrants aren't being held accountable and frustration with inaction in Washington.

In terms of legacy, in a time when invoking Ronald Reagan is almost sacred, it's slightly ironic that many hard-core Republicans are finding the amnesty Reagan granted in 1986 bittersweet.

To some, it's just plain bitter.

"We call it immigration. They should call it an invasion. I want to know why people in Washington are sitting on their hands. There's two good men in federal prison right now," said Richard Scott, of Inman, referring to U.S. border patrol guards convicted of killing a Mexican drug smuggler crossing this country's southern border.

"They were there doing their job. We need to get them out."

'Betrayal of our heritage'

Amnesty means different things to different people, and DeMint was among the first to call the controversial immigration reform bill working its way through Washington "amnesty."

He's been able to use that to his advantage, rallying staunch conservatives and putting himself on the opposite side of the immigration fence from fellow South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham.

DeMint used his time at Wade's restaurant Tuesday to lash out at the immigration reform bill.

He called it a veiled attempt by Democrats to build support for labor unions and that party's voting base - and added that without secure borders, which he says the bill fails to adequately address, no measure of reform could have lasting impact, anyway.

The senator called himself "pro-immigration," and often went back to the need for an easier form of legal immigration in this country. But he said the controversial reform bill - co-sponsored by Republican Sen. John McCain and Democratic Sen. Ted Kennedy - "will eventually lead toward resentment among immigrants."

He's made his distaste for the bill known, but said Tuesday he would work to amend it and, if that doesn't work, do everything he can to stop it.

DeMint drew several rounds of applause from the standing-room-only crowd at Wade's. His comments come just a day after President Bush's latest attack on opponents of the immigration deal, saying Monday in Georgia that they don't "want to do what's right for America."

The complex bill is a compromise and has drawn attacks from liberal and conservative groups. DeMint said he had 10 staff members working daily to read the 1,000-page bill, looking up references and deciphering what it will do, as compared to what supporters have claimed it will do.

The South Carolina senator said that negotiators "won't come to the table," and called the current bill a "betrayal of our American heritage, where we welcome immigrants who want to work, who share our values."

'Going to affect all of us'

Representatives of at least 25 farms from York, Spartanburg, Greenville and Laurens counties attended the DeMint event.

The farmers have been concerned about federal requirements that agriculture guest workers must be paid more than those who come to America to work in other industries - hospitality or landscaping, for instance. They're also worried that the current immigration reform, if it passes, will leave them without enough of a labor force to plant, maintain and harvest their crops.

"You can't just shut down the world for four years," Henry Gramling, of Gramling Farms, told the senator.

Later, Gramling said, "The thing that scares me is that it will be incomplete, insufficient and not work in a timely manner. We have crops that do not care how slow the government works. They're going to ripen when the sun is shining."

DeMint played to the crowd, saying "South Carolina needs immigrant labor probably more than any other state."

He said he favors more temporary workers in this country, a better supervisory system, and a biometric identification card system.

But it wasn't long before he dropped the A-Bomb.

DeMint believes the current bill offers amnesty to illegal immigrants, whereas supporters of the bill say it doesn't. That one buzzword has generated as much cheerleading and ill will toward immigration reform as any debate has.

"All the illegals would have legal status. They call it probationary, but there is no limit on how long they can be on probation. So, they have permanent legal status," DeMint said.

Strong border control and a worker identification program must be in place before America's immigration system can have a meaningful reform, he said.

In a statement released Tuesday, Graham's office pointed out that legal status would not be granted until several benchmarks for border enforcement are met, including increasing border fencing, increasing the size of the border patrol, and adding ground-based radar and cameras along the U.S.-Mexican border.

DeMint said he believes an alternative to the current plan is possible without deporting 12 million people - that laws can be put in place to force illegal immigrants to return home and come to America legally.

"They were very creative in getting here. They can be very creative in getting out," DeMint said. "If you can't get a job without a legal card, pretty soon they're going to go home and get a card."

Marlene Saad, a Republican activist, called illegal immigration "out of control," but said she was encouraged by DeMint.

"I'm concerned about the farmers," she said. "It's not only going to affect them, it's going to affect all of us."

'I'm not for amnesty'

Inglis, being in the House of Representatives, has more wiggle room on the matter, as the bill is still in the Senate - the bill could be killed, or entirely different by the time he is to vote on it. But after two hours of increasingly heated discussion Tuesday night, Inglis was wavering in high gear.

Inglis spent most of the time going around the Pine Street Elementary School gym taking down questions and opinions. There were plenty of each.

People wanted to know why the border fence President Bush approved last year has made only minimal progress. They wanted to know why U.S. troops are on the South Korean border when they could be on the U.S.-Mexican border. They wanted to know why laws passed during the Reagan amnesty aren't being enforced. They wanted to know America isn't doing more to hold its Southern neighbor accountable for a shared problem.

"We didn't pay to bring them in, we shouldn't pay to send them back," said Steve Atkins of Spartanburg. "You shun them. You don't give them a place to sleep. You don't give them anything to eat. They will deport themselves."

One woman, a legal immigrant from Ireland, told Inglis she has a college degree but can't find a job - and that it breaks her heart knowing that illegal immigrants are finding work without paying taxes or going through the legal hurdles she had to.

Boos

Another woman said she was convinced that a North America union is emerging, one where the United States' sovereignty melts away and this country blends in with Mexico and Canada.

One man pointed out that he volunteers at a local soup kitchen, and last week didn't see any Hispanics there, because they were all out working. You couldn't hear the three or four people clapping because of all the boos.

Still another pointed out that it is the executive branch of government's job to enforce current laws, and - surprisingly - he got some scattered applause when he mentioned impeaching Bush for not doing so.

Inglis began his presentation with a Bible verse: "When an alien lives with you, do not mistreat him."

Soon after, one man shouted, "I can tell you're for amnesty," and walked out.

Supporting English

But Inglis continued to talk over the increasingly restless crowd, going through his four action points on solving immigration: securing the southern border, with troops if necessary; requiring employers to verify Social Security numbers; creating a temporary worker program suited to America's needs; and increasing the number of legal immigrants allowed in this country. He also believes in making English this country's official language.

Inglis highlighted the points in the current bill that he likes, and then compared those to the Reagan amnesty to show how they were different. He said the controversial bill in Washington isn't amnesty because it forces people to face consequences for their actions.

Inglis said he's not sure what the bill will be by the time he sees it. Outside, after the program as 40-or-so people swarmed about him, one woman finally got him to say, "I'm not for amnesty."

But she wasn't convinced.

"Amnesty is just a code word for you. If they get what they came here for, that's amnesty," said Katherine Allen of Roebuck.

"He's a typical politician. I don't know where he stands."

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