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National ID card

There's a growing consensus in Congress that immigration needs reform now. It didn't rate a mention on the action plan announced by Republican leaders this week, but President Bush reiterated at his press conference Wednesday, "It will be one of my priorities. I believe it is necessary to reform the immigration system."

The only problem is that "reform" has at least two very different meanings. For Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., powerful chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, it means doing more to keep out of the United States people who shouldn't be here. For others, it means making it legal for more people to come in.

Sensenbrenner's goal is sensible. He argues: "American citizens have the right to know who is in their country; that people are who they say they are; that the name on a driver's license is the holder's real name, not some alias; and that everybody has one driver's license from one state, rather than a pocketful of driver's licenses issued by several states."

With estimates of there being as many as 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States, it might be that a national identification card is necessary. The issue here is whether the driver's license ID is used to collect information or as an enforcement tool. The federal government's primary focus for more than a decade has been on enforcement, and it has proved an ineffective policy. The flow of illegal immigration has increased.

At the moment, there are problems with driver's licenses as proof of legal residency. For one thing, some states permit illegal immigrants to obtain a driver's license. If that provision were eliminated, the licensing standards would effectively create a national identification card. While Americans have long resisted such a measure, they might accept a card as a necessary security step.

Cards would be useful if there were no incentive for illegal immigrants to forge them, as is the case today with Social Security and green cards. If federal standards for driver's licenses were approved, and they were used as an enforcement tool, there's little doubt illegal immigrants would find a way to get around the requirement.

The surest path to knowing who is in this country and where they are would be to begin decriminalizing immigration for workers. That would be best accomplished through a guest-worker program.

The bill introduced by Reps. Jeff Flake and Jim Kolbe along with Sen. John McCain allows anyone who so desires to obtain a work visa, so long as an employer agrees to give him or her work. Workers under this plan would have no need to hide from authorities or seek anonymity, as illegal workers today do. They are not, as most immigration authorities will agree, criminals. They are driven only by the desire to create a better life. So far, no amount of enforcement alone has matched the power of that desire.

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