

# Irish illegals in US

8 OCT 2007

Irish Times

Mon, Oct 08, 2007

A fresh effort is being made in the US to find a solution to the thousands of illegal Irish immigrants whose status there is precarious, to say the least. The focus of these efforts was the visit last week of Minister for Foreign Affairs Dermot Ahern to New York (where he addressed the UN General Assembly) and Washington where, among other appointments, he met the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice.

While in Washington, Mr Ahern also took the opportunity to meet several politicians sympathetic to Ireland, including senators Edward Kennedy and Patrick Leahy and chairman of the Congressional Friends of Ireland Richard Neal.

Efforts to make conclusive headway on the issue of Irish illegals has run into the sands of wider political battles in Washington. Since last year's mid-term elections, Congress and the White House have not co-existed in harmony.

The Democrats are in command of Capitol Hill and a deeply wounded president is seeing out his final days, surrounded by policy failures at home and abroad, political scandal and growing public rejection of the neo-conservative philosophy that brought his administration to power. The Democrats have no reason to make life easier for Mr Bush.

There are about 12 million illegals in the US (the vast majority of them from Latin America) and the problems of the estimated 5,000 to 25,000 Irish are, it must be acknowledged, modest by comparison.

Irish-American interests are seeking now to decouple the matter of Irish illegals from the others. They have proposed that a link be made instead between the case of the Irish and the Northern Ireland peace process.

This may strike some as tenuous but proponents - among them Mr Ahern - maintain that such a link exists in reality. Mr Ahern said he told Ms Rice that "a lot" of the Irish illegals were in the US "because of unemployment in yesteryear, unemployment created by the conflict, people specifically because of the conflict would have left Ireland and Northern Ireland and the Border areas".

The very nature of the problem makes it well nigh impossible to test the veracity of such an assertion. Proponents hope eventually that a Bill allowing for more visas for Irish in the US, and for Americans coming to Ireland, might allow for a wiping clean of the slate and thus regularise the illegals status.

Some 40 million Americans claim Irish ancestry. Proponents will dangle their votes before candidates seeking to succeed Mr Bush next year.

© 2007 The Irish Times