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House Approves Intelligence Bill

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ASHINGTON, Oct. 8 - The House adopted a Republican-sponsored bill on Friday that would restructure the nation's intelligence community in response to the recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission. But the measure is so different from a bipartisan Senate bill that many lawmakers say it may be impossible to reconcile them.

The bill, adopted 282 to 134 as many House members prepared to return home this weekend to campaign for re-election, would establish the job of national intelligence director, a central proposal of the Sept. 11 commission. But the intelligence director would have significantly less authority over budgets and personnel than the commission recommended or than the Senate bill sets forth.

The House bill also has a variety of law enforcement and immigration provisions not requested by the commission and opposed by Democratic lawmakers and civil liberties groups. Some of the provisions would make it harder for immigrants to obtain political asylum and would subject them to speedy deportation without judicial review.

Friday's vote came after two days of often starkly partisan debate, with Democratic lawmakers accusing the House Republican leadership of trying to sabotage final passage of a bill to enact the commission's recommendations.

In its final report in July, the 10-member commission documented a long history of incompetence and turf battles among intelligence and counterterrorism agencies, and urged that the agencies be brought under the control of a single, powerful intelligence director.

The leaders of the bipartisan commission enthusiastically supported the Senate bill, which was adopted Wednesday on a 96-to-2 vote with none of the partisanship evident in the House. The commission leaders had urged House members to use it as a model.

But late Thursday night, the House rejected a bill that was similar in many ways to the Senate measure and would have been easier to reconcile in a conference committee.

"It's not hard to see what's going on here," said Representative Carolyn B. Maloney,

Democrat of New York. "Some say that the goal of the Republican leadership is to pass a bill that cannot be reconciled with the Senate bill before the election. The Republican leadership knows that after the elections, when the political pressure is off, the prospects for reform will vanish."

Speaker J. Dennis Hastert said that for many House Democrats opposed to the bill, "it is simply their nature to complain." Mr. Hastert promised that a House-Senate conference committee would quickly agree on a compromise bill that could be sent to President Bush for his signature. "At the end of the day, we will enact a law that will make America safer and the American people proud," he said.

The new chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Peter Hoekstra, Republican of Michigan, said the House bill reflected the obligation of House members to "put our imprint on the recommendations of the 9/11 commission" and to improve on them.

The committee's ranking Democrat, Representative Jane Harman of California, said the House bill was evidence of a "highly partisan process" devised by Republican leaders in responding to the findings of the Sept. 11 commission. "In case anybody missed it, the terrorists didn't check our party labels before they attacked us, and they certainly won't care whether we're Democrats or Republicans when they try to attack us again," Ms. Harman said.

House and Senate leaders have promised to establish a conference committee within days that will negotiate during the Congressional recess that begins this weekend. The conferees will be asked to reconcile the many differences in the two bills, notably those on the powers of a national intelligence director.

They will also have to decide whether the compromise bill should retain the immigration and law-enforcement provisions that Republican leaders tacked onto the House bill even though they were not sought by the Sept. 11 commission.

In the final hours of the House debate, Republican leaders beat back two amendments to eliminate the provisions making it harder for immigrants to obtain asylum and speeding up deportation.

House leaders did agree to amend wording that would have allowed the government to deport foreign terror suspects to countries where they could face torture. The amendment, proposed by Representative John Hostettler, Republican of Indiana, would allow the Department of Homeland Security to detain the suspects but would bar deportation until after the State Department had sought assurances that they would not be harmed. "It will protect the American people from dangerous aliens while continuing our nation's proud history of providing refuge for the innocent," Mr. Hostettler said.

But Representative Christopher H. Smith, Republican of New Jersey, a longstanding advocate of human rights causes in the House, said the bill would "erect a number of brand-new barriers to asylum claims" and would result in "bona fide refugees being

returned to their persecutors."

The final House bill would allow speedy deportation, without judicial review, of illegal immigrants who have been in the United States less than five years, compared with two years under current law.

The legislation would make it easier for an immigration judge to dismiss asylum claims based on a number of factors, including a petitioner's demeanor. It would also increase the burden of proof imposed on asylum seekers who are accused of being terrorists by their home governments, which critics said could threaten dissidents fleeing repressive governments.

Opponents of the provisions, including some Republicans from districts with large immigrant communities, scoffed at the idea that repressive governments like those of Cuba or Sudan could be trusted if they gave assurances that their citizens deported from the United States would not be subjected to torture.

"It is unfortunate to diminish the rights of people who are legitimately fearing for their lives," said Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a Republican whose southern Florida district includes many immigrants from Cuba.