

Reid says no one in D.C. willing to compromise

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

Legislation, as Sen. Harry Reid often says, is the art of compromise. But lately, Reid has not been in a compromising mood.

“Who would I negotiate with?” Reid said last week when asked about his recently expressed reticence to parley with Republicans over how to keep student loan rates from rising on July 1, an issue on which Republicans and Reid’s Democrats differ. “I don’t know of anyone. I’m serious about that. I don’t know of anyone.”

In light of Republicans and Democrats trying their best to work with fresh bipartisan vigor on divisive issues from immigration reform to the federal budget, Reid’s observation might sound like defeatism.

But the conclusion he has been building toward for years also is the foundation of a strategy Reid regularly deploys to achieve his aims.



Sen. Harry Reid says compromise is elusive in Washington. Photo/LTN file

Ask Democrats why Reid is sticking so fiercely to his proposal to extend student loan rates instead of linking them to interest rates, as Republicans would prefer, and they will recall December 2011, when Reid and Republicans couldn't agree on how to offset the cost of a payroll-tax-cut extension.

Reid didn't like the Republican proposal to pay for it with a salary freeze for federal employees. He dug in his heels, insisting he would go no further than a temporary extension. After a punishing few weeks as the target of campaign-style advocacy, Republicans acquiesced – 36 hours before Christmas.

Since then, the experience of the debt ceiling, budget, sequestration and “fiscal cliff” suggest that as the hourglass runs low, the House can be driven to follow, albeit often at the last minute, the Senate's lead.

“The play right now is to put (House Speaker John) Boehner in a box ... to make it so uncomfortable for Boehner that this is his only course of action,” said David Damore, a professor of political science at UNLV. “He either has to let popular legislation die going into 2014 or, essentially, allow Democrats to be part of the winning coalition. Or does he want to run in the midterm with his party killing immigration and killing student loans?”

Congress will contend this summer with issues that are both pressing and practically designed to play on the campaign trail. The first half of the summer promises to be dominated by immigration and student loan rates, and the second half by immigration and the budget.

On immigration reform and student loans, Democrats have the more naturally crafted sales pitch.

“On immigration and student loans, Reid is in a position of strength, on the substance, on the politics and on his team sticking together,” said Eric Herzik, a political science professor at UNR.

“Republicans have to figure out a way to keep their most conservative Tea Party base happy while at the same time at least start to talk to immigrants, especially Latinos. ... And on student loans, Republicans can’t make up a good story line. It’s not only a lot of young people trying to pay their student loans, it’s their parents, too.”

Republicans, however, are in no mood to roll over. Boehner’s House passed a student loans bill last week despite the threat of veto by President Obama, and the speaker has been adamant that while he supports the idea of comprehensive immigration reform, he has no intention of having the House rubber-stamp the Senate’s proposal.

But if Reid is listening to Boehner’s words, he’s filtering them liberally.

“He’s already said a lot of things,” Reid said, calmly dismissing the force of Boehner’s stated plans for immigration and saying with steely confidence: “I would prefer them to pass our bill.”

Reid, for months, has been maintaining a nearly split stance when it comes to his estimation of Republicans in the House and Senate.

On the one hand, he oversees a Senate in which he routinely expounds on the merits of bipartisan cooperation, as he has lately with his hands-off approach to the Senate’s immigration bill, designed by a bipartisan group of eight lawmakers and vetted through the regular order in the Senate Judiciary Committee.

On the other hand, he is still Democrats’ No. 1 attack dog, charged with pillorying his Republican counterparts.

Lately, Reid has abandoned the 2012 election description of Republicans as “extreme” in favor of calling them “anarchists.”

“You have to understand, we’re in a period where the anarchists have taken over the House of Representatives,” he said in a recent interview, supporting his claim with: “I studied the anarchists, before World War I, after World War I. ... Some say they’re the ones who started World War I. Now the new anarchists aren’t violent. But they still have the same basic beliefs that the anarchists had – no government.”

Reid’s firebrand tactics are normally part of a larger, coordinated strategy to advance the Democratic position.

“If Reid pushes too hard and becomes the bad cop, he’s usually able to find a good cop to carry his message for him,” Herzik said.

Usually, the good-cop role is played by the White House, whether it’s Obama intervening on grand bargain talks with Boehner or Vice President Joe Biden spending New Year’s Eve at the Capitol to hash out the final details of a fiscal cliff deal with Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell.

But with the White House largely distracted by scandals at the IRS and National Security Agency, Reid has lately been on his own, and as such may be seeing other incentives to make an uncompromising push for the Democratic platform.

“You look at 2014 and those Senate seats, and it’s going to be hard for Reid to hold the Senate,” Damore said. “So he’s got to do all this now; otherwise, he’s just going to be the minority leader.”

Even Reid has obliquely referred to the potential of losing the Senate in reference to his agenda, telling an audience at a ceremony on Capitol Hill last week to honor the victims of last December’s school shooting in Newtown, Conn., that a Republican-controlled Senate is a sure sign that “we’ll never, ever get anything done” on gun control.

As long as he has a Democratic majority, Reid can put relative

faith in the reliability of his caucus. In every major deal of the past two years, Senate Democrats have stuck together more than any other quadrant of Congress.

“This divisiveness within the Republican caucus is new. Traditionally Democrats are the more divided caucus, so they were the ones that could be split,” Damore said. “But now, there’s hay to be made for that. ... The issues line up well for him, so why not take the opportunity?”

In lieu of a negotiating partner, Reid is publicly relying on the strength of the Senate Democrats, and the substance of his position, to try to knock out the top items on his agenda.

“I feel confident we’ll get something done, in spite of the Tea Party (on immigration) ... because it’s an issue that 80 percent of the American people support,” Reid said. “Now maybe (Republicans) will do the same thing with this that they did with guns – 90 percent of the American people supported gun legislation. But I think that they’d better be very careful.”

In a divided Congress, to truly operate without a negotiating partner is a tall task. But, experts remind, even in an adverse environment, Reid is still a dealmaker. So broadcasting that he can’t make a deal may be just what lets Reid get a deal done.

“At the point Reid is finally just saying, ‘I’ve got no one to work with, so I don’t even have to concern myself with them, I’m just going to pummel whomever’s on the other side’ ... then you’re really not attempting to negotiate. But I don’t think that’s happening,” Herzik said.

“What Harry Reid says at the start of an issue and where he ends up on the issue can be very different. Because he’s ultimately about guiding an issue to conclusion.”