

“Why Statehood for the District of Columbia Makes Sense Now”

Testimony of Alice M. Rivlin*

The Brookings Institution and Georgetown University

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Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Coburn and members of the Committee:

I am delighted that you are holding this hearing on statehood for the District of Columbia and happy to share my views. I hope this hearing will focus national attention on the outrageous situation of citizens of the United State who happen to live in the District of Columbia. We are not in fact full citizens of this great democracy. We do not have the same rights and responsibilities of self-government enjoyed by citizens of the 50 states, and we cannot participate equally in governing the Nation. This situation is both an anomaly and an anachronism. I hope this hearing will start a process leading to statehood for the District of Columbia.

A bizarre anomaly. It is hard to explain to anyone why a nation that sees itself as a beacon of democracy keeps the more than a half million inhabitants of its capitol city from normal participation in the governance of the country. Americans are proud of our Constitution and our nearly two and a half centuries of evolving democracy. We preach self-government around the globe, often in cultures without our strong democratic tradition. We send our finest young people to risk their lives in far-away places in the name of protecting the rights of other countries’ citizens to self-determination. Our television networks proudly show pictures of voters in Iraq or Afghanistan standing in long lines to cast their ballots in their national elections. But those same networks rarely mention that citizens of the District of Columbia are denied the right of full self- government. DC citizens pay our taxes, serve in the armed forces, and if necessary make the ultimate sacrifice to defend democracy around the world. But here at home we cannot vote for full representation in the Congress of the United States. This is an inconvenient truth about America, which should be changed forthwith.

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A strange anachronism. Over two centuries ago when the District of Columbia was created and the national government moved to this site on the Potomac, it would have been hard to imagine a thriving metropolis in this ten mile square. The new nation's capital was mostly open land with small settlements and muddy streets. The census of 1800 counted only about 8 thousand people living in the District of Columbia and only about 15 thousand by 1810. The new nation proclaimed itself committed to representative government, but the concept of voting rights was limited. Most of the adults living in the District would not have been eligible to vote by the standards of the day, because they were female, African American (both slave and free) or didn't own property. The few voices protesting exclusion of the District from representation in the new Congress were easily ignored.

Between then and now two revolutions have totally changed the picture. American democracy evolved from idea to reality. After great struggle, the Nation abolished slavery and gradually committed to voting rights for adult citizens of all races and genders. Over the same period the District of Columbia grew from a village to a vibrant city. Its growing population numbers about 646 thousand-- larger than Vermont and Wyoming—and its vibrant urban economy has a bigger gross domestic product than 16 states. It is past time to bring the rights and responsibilities of DC citizens up to date. Statehood would do exactly that.

The fiscal viability of the District of Columbia. Twenty years ago, one could have raised legitimate doubts about the fiscal wisdom of statehood for the District. Washington, like many central cities, had lost population over several decades. Much of the middle class, both black and white, had moved to the suburbs, leaving behind abandoned houses, boarded up stores, and distressed neighborhoods. A deteriorating tax base and fiscal mismanagement brought the city close to bankruptcy. The situation was not as serious as that facing Detroit at present, but it warranted federal intervention. The Clinton Administration, working with DC Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton and a Republican-led Congress put in place a "control board" charged with restoring the city to fiscal health. The same legislation created an independent Office of the Chief Financial Officer (OCFO) for in the District. The OCFO has had able leadership and has been effective in strengthening the District's finances.

The combination of fiscal reform and a recovering economy led to rapid improvement in the District's financial situation. The federally appointed "control board," which I chaired for its final three years, was able to declare victory and go out of business at the end of fiscal year 2001. Since then, both the city's economy and its fiscal health have continued to improve remarkably. The long decline in population finally turned around. Last year DC population grew faster than that of any state except North Dakota. The city weathered the Great Recession far better than most cities. It has balanced its budget every year for 17 years, made substantial investments in improving its schools and other services, built up a substantial balance in the general fund, and enjoyed high bond ratings. There is no longer any reason to worry that the District would not be a fiscally viable state.

Other steps toward autonomy and national representation for the District. I strongly favor statehood for the District of Columbia, but it may not happen quickly. In the meantime, Congress should take at least two steps that partially remedy the anomalous and anachronistic situation of DC citizens. The District should have budget autonomy. It should be able to spend its locally raised revenues to meet the needs of its citizens without delay or interference from Congress. The District's able representative in the House of Representatives should have full voting rights like other members of Congress.

In sum, Mr. Chairman, I commend the Committee for holding this hearing and urge Congress to enact statehood for the District of Columbia.