

Opening Statement for Business Meeting

Chairman Joe Lieberman

February 11, 2009

Good morning. The meeting will now come to order. I'd like to welcome everyone to the Committee's first business meeting of the 111th Congress and offer a warm welcome to our new members, Senators Burris, Bennet, McCain, Ensign and Graham. I am happy to say that this Committee has a proud history of bipartisanship and productivity, and Senator Collins and I look forward to continuing in that tradition for the coming Congress.

We have five items of business today. Two have to do with the Committee's organization: the adoption of our funding resolution and the adoption of our Committee rules.

There are also three bills pending before the Committee – each of which we reported out during the previous Congress. The first bill, S. 160, would provide the citizens of the District of Columbia with full voting rights in the House of Representatives. The second bill, S. 303, reauthorizes the Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement

Act. And the third measure would create a Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Latin Americans of Japanese Descent.

The D.C. House Voting Rights Act, S.160, which I hope we can pass this year, provides full voting rights in the House of Representatives for the residents of the District of Columbia.

This is familiar territory for this Committee. I have introduced similar bills or versions of this bill in every Congress since the 107th, working side by side with D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, who has been an indefatigable leader on this issue for decades. I also want to acknowledge Senator Hatch, who joined me in introducing this bill for a second time, for his continued, steadfast support of this bill. He set aside partisanship to join me in righting a historic wrong and I admire his commitment to this cause.

It has been a controversial subject, and still is in some quarters, but I am committed to seeing this bill signed into law so that we can right an historic injustice that the citizens of the District have been forced to endure because of a Congressional oversight that occurred when the

District was created in 1800. I am grateful for the support of Committee co-sponsors Senators Carper, Landrieu, and McCaskill.

Last Congress, House leaders reached a breakthrough agreement with their Republican colleagues to balance the addition of a voting member of Congress for the District of Columbia with the addition of a fourth congressional seat for the state of Utah. They passed the measure overwhelmingly.

I was proud to introduce the bill in the Senate with my friend Senator Hatch. And 57 Senators voted in favor, including Senators Levin, Akaka, Carper, Pryor, Landrieu, McCaskill, Tester, our Ranking Member Senator Collins and Senator Voinovich, all members of the Committee. Unfortunately, that was three votes shy of the number needed to overcome a filibuster.

I hope and think that this is our year. We have just witnessed an historic presidential inauguration, one many people thought would never happen. This year, the 111th Congress has the opportunity to make history, as well, by passing this legislation.

Opponents argue that congressional representation is granted only to the states and therefore our legislation is unconstitutional. That is not my reading, nor is it the reading of Constitutional experts including Ken Starr, who assure us the authority to bestow voting rights on the District lies within the District Clause of the Constitution (Article I, Section 8), where it states Congress has the power “to exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever over such District.” While I believe we are on firm legal ground, I understand that there are expert opinions on both sides of this issue, and that is why this bill provides for expedited judicial review should there be a legal challenge if this measure passes.

I would note that the Committee has received letters in support of this legislation from the American Bar Association, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and a group of 25 legal scholars representing law schools from across the country. And last Congress the Committee received a letter from a group of 25 elected and appointed officials, including Jack Kemp, Michael Steele, JC Watts, and Eric Holder, supporting the previous version of this bill.

The right to be counted, to have your voice heard by your government, is central to a functioning democracy, fundamental to a free society, and the birthright of all Americans, no matter where they live.

I urge my colleagues to support this effort and provide the citizens of the District of Columbia with the basic Constitutional right to representation that they - and every other American - deserve.

Allow me to say a few words about the Committee's agenda for the 111th Congress. Since shortly after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, this Committee has spent a good deal of its time helping to restructure the federal government to prepare for, prevent, and respond to catastrophic disasters in a unified, coordinated, and effective way.

With the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the reorganization of the intelligence community, the implementation of the 9/11 Commission recommendations, and our work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we have broken down territorial and bureaucratic rivalries, improved communications and information sharing between all levels of government, and developed better partnerships with public and

private sector actors in order to keep the American people secure within our own borders.

Our legislative accomplishments have been real and substantial, but our work is far from finished. This year, one of our top priorities will be passage of the first authorization bill for the Department of Homeland Security to clarify the department's responsibilities and outline areas of improvement that will make DHS more successful in its mission. We look forward to opening discussions with our colleagues and the Administration to set DHS on a clear course for the future.

I am also hopeful that we will produce legislation this year to implement recommendations from the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism. We will hold a hearing tomorrow to discuss one Commission recommendation -- to merge the Homeland Security Council with the National Security Council.

The Committee has begun to look at the federal financial regulatory structure that failed to predict, much less prevent, the unprecedented economic crisis we are now experiencing. This is a

logical follow-on to the Committee's 2002 investigation into the Enron failure and scandal, which illustrated some of the same regulatory weaknesses that have been blamed for our current troubles. We have a number of hearings planned on issues relevant to our jurisdiction over governmental reorganization and operations and we plan to put the Committee's experience and historical knowledge of financial regulation to good use.

We also intend to conduct oversight in a number of critical homeland security areas including the federal government's efforts to secure our information technology infrastructure, and to improve rail and transit security.

And I hope this is the year that we are able to extend a full array of benefits, as well as responsibilities, to the domestic partners of federal employees.

