

## STATEMENT

Senator Joseph I. Lieberman

### **Opening Statement: Congressional Voting Representation for Citizens of the District of Columbia**

Thursday, May 23, 2002

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Thank you. Senator Feingold, Representative Norton, Congressman Regula, Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, Mayor Williams, Council Chairman Cropp, fellow Committee members, it's good to have you all here this morning.

This hearing has been called to discuss a matter that is, for 600,000 American citizens, an ongoing injustice—and is, for the nation as a whole, a stain on the fabric of our democracy. That is, when will we finally extend voting representation in Congress to citizens of the District of Columbia? This is a question that is of great importance for our country, and the Governmental Affairs Committee, which has oversight over municipal affairs of the District, clearly has considerable jurisdiction over this issue.

It is almost incomprehensible that in this day and age, ours is the only democracy in the world in which citizens of the capital city are not represented in the national legislature. Think of what visitors from around the world must think of that when they come to see our beautiful landmarks, our monuments, and our Capitol dome—proud symbols of the world's leading democracy—only to learn that the people who live in this city, and see those landmarks every day, have no voice in the national legislature. What would we do if, because of some glitch, the residents of Boston, Nashville, Denver, Seattle, or El Paso had no voting rights? All those cities are about the same size as Washington, D.C.—and I know we as a nation wouldn't let their citizens go voiceless in the Congress.

Citizens of the District pay taxes, serve their fellow citizens here at home, and serve and die in war, yet are denied the opportunity to choose voting representatives in the legislature which governs them and the rest of America. Even though they pay taxes, they have no say about how high those taxes are or on what priorities that money will be spent. To put it in particularly sharp relief, this city's people and institutions have been the direct target of terrorists—but as we in the Congress debate and vote on policies to protect our country, citizens of the District have no one who can cast a vote.

I think that in 2002, we should all understand that the vote is a civic entitlement of every American citizen. It is democracy's most essential right, our most useful tool. The citizens who live in our nation's capital deserve more than a non-voting delegate in the House. Notwithstanding the strong service of the Honorable Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, who is with us today, non-voting representation isn't good enough. While Ms. Norton may vote in committees, she cannot vote on the House floor.

I am proud to be the chief Senate sponsor of the *No Taxation Without Representation Act* here in the Senate, which Congresswoman Norton has introduced in the House. I am delighted that Sen. Feingold, who is also an original sponsor of this legislation, is with us today. Its name is taken from our own revolution because our forebearers went to war rather than pay taxes without being represented. The citizens of our capital city believe in the principles the nation's revolutionary heroes established as a result of our own revolution.

Despite the bill's title, *No Taxation Without Representation*, the people of the District seek voting representation, not exemption from taxes. The bill

states that DC residents shall have full voting representation in the Congress. The tax provision is in the bill for ironic effect to remind us of the American principle that gave birth to the nation – that no woman or man should be required to pay taxes to a government until represented by a vote on what that government does or requires. No other tax paying Americans are required to pay taxes without representation in the Congress.

I don't believe in governing by polls, but polls can be revealing. A recent national poll shows that a majority of Americans believe that D.C. residents already have Congressional voting rights. When informed that they do not, 80 percent say that D.C. residents should have full representation. In righting this wrong, we won't only be following the will of the American people. We will be following the will of history. When they placed our Capital, which was not yet established in their day, under the jurisdiction of the Congress, the framers of our Constitution in effect placed with Congress the solemn responsibility of assuring that the rights of D.C. citizens would be protected in the future, just as it is our responsibility to protect the rights of all citizens throughout this great country. Congress has failed to meet this obligation for more than 200 years—and I, for one, am not prepared to make D.C. citizens wait another 200.

In the words of this city's namesake, our first President, "Precedents are dangerous things; let the reins of government then be braced and held with a steady hand, and every violation of the Constitution be reprehended: If defective let it be amended, but not suffered to be trampled upon whilst it has an existence."

The people of D.C. have suffered this Constitutional defect for far too long. Let's reprehend it and amend it together.

I look forward to hearing from our panel of witnesses today.

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