

Questions for Tom Perez from Senator Hatch

Mr. Perez, many Senators have expressed their view of the direction and the priorities that the Civil Rights Division should have in the new administration. I believe the division has in the last several years had a more comprehensive view of civil rights. That more comprehensive view, in my judgment, encompasses all Americans. It includes but goes beyond the limited categories of the past such as race. And so I am very concerned that the Civil Rights Division may abandon some very important civil rights initiatives in areas other than race. I also raised this issue at the confirmation hearings for Attorney General Eric Holder and Associate Attorney General Tom Perrelli. In the last several years, for example, the division has sought to protect Americans against religious discrimination. The Civil Rights Division launched what is called the First Freedom Project. The right to freely exercise religion is the first individual freedom mentioned in the Bill of Rights. I have worked for many years in this area, for example, with your former boss, Senator Kennedy. The Department has a Special Counsel for Religious Discrimination, which I believe has been very effective and very important to the success of this project. I know you mentioned this briefly in your opening statement at the hearing, but I would appreciate a fuller explanation of your view. Please describe your own view of the importance of this area of civil rights protection. Do you anticipate the Civil Rights Division maintaining this as a program or initiative? Will you consider maintaining the position of Special Counsel for Religious Discrimination? If possible, I would appreciate something more than saying you will consult with the Attorney General.

Response: If confirmed, I will make sure combating religious discrimination remains a priority of the Civil Rights Division. I believe that protecting Americans against religious discrimination is an important component of civil rights enforcement. As Special Counsel to Senator Kennedy, I had the privilege of working with your former Chief Counsel in drafting the Church Arson Prevention Act of 1996. This critical legislation, which passed unanimously, was the Congressional response to the spate of church arsons that plagued the country during this period. As a Department of Justice attorney, I also was involved in a number of prosecutions of people who targeted religious minorities and places of worship. If confirmed, I will work to ensure that the Division continues to use existing statutory tools to combat religious discrimination.

Another area in which the Civil Rights Division has been doing, if I may say, the Lord's work is combating the scourge of human trafficking. I cosponsored the reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act last year, which was introduced by our former colleague and current Vice President Joe Biden. Human trafficking has, in my view, properly been understood to be a modern form of slavery and is properly the focus on the Civil Rights Division. My former counsel Grace Becker was committed to that effort before she became Acting Attorney General and did a great job in both capacities. Once again, you mentioned this in passing in your opening statement but I would like to hear a more complete description of your thoughts in this area. Do you believe that human trafficking is properly addressed in the civil rights context? Do you anticipate the Civil Rights Division continuing to make this an important priority?

Response: Human trafficking is a core civil rights crime, and enforcement of human trafficking laws will remain a priority of the Civil Rights Division if I am confirmed. As Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, I was heavily involved in the supervision of modern day slavery prosecutions. In addition, I co-chaired the Worker Exploitation Task Force, an inter-agency initiative established by then Attorney General Janet Reno to ensure that the federal government was putting its best foot forward in combating these heinous crimes. This Task Force recommended a series of legislative reforms that were enacted by Congress in 2000, and were reauthorized last year. The Civil Rights Division under President George W. Bush made great progress in combating human trafficking and, if confirmed, I will continue these efforts.