

Statement of

# The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator  
Vermont  
June 29, 2006

Opening Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy

Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary

Executive Business Meeting

June 28, 2006

Listed today for the second time on the Committee's agenda is S.2703, our bipartisan bill to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act. The Committee turns to this bill the same day our nation's papers are reporting on the important decision yesterday by the United States Supreme Court on the Texas redistricting case. The Court held that the Voting Rights Act was violated in the redrawing of district 23 because it abridged the voting rights of the Latino-Americans in that district. This serves as a timely reminder of the continuing relevance of the Voting Rights Act. This was decided under section 2 of the Act because the Justice Department did not utilize its authority under section 5.

The House of Representatives stands poised to build on a strong bipartisan consensus and vote to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act despite the efforts of a few opponents to delay and derail the progress that has been made. Just last night, in fact, the House wisely rejected an amendment to an appropriations bill that would have stripped funding of the enforcement of the Act's critical language minority protection provisions. This action would have been an affront to the law and fundamental fairness, amounting to a backdoor repeal of Section 203. Had this amendment passed, on the same day the United States Supreme Court recognized the disenfranchisement of 100,000 Latino-Americans in violation of the Voting Rights Act, it would have dealt a tremendous blow to our Nation's commitment to ensuring that all American citizens have the ability to vote. Had it passed, those who would discriminate against those who are not fluent in English would extinguish the torch on the Statue of Liberty. That is wrong, it is mean spirited, and it cannot be allowed to prevail.

We in the Senate should similarly reject efforts to derail the progress we have made. We need to accord the Voting Rights Act the priority it deserves and to move forward with our bipartisan bill to reauthorize it. I hope that when we return from next week's recess, we will make it our first priority. Twelve of the 18 Members of this Committee are cosponsors of this legislation. We have held extensive hearings on this important subject over the past three months. I had hoped that we would have completed all necessary hearings in May and that we would have been in a position to have reported the bill by now. We are behind schedule and should not delay consideration further. I look forward to our reporting this important legislation to the Senate our first week back in session. I intend to cooperate in that important bipartisan effort and urge others to cooperate, as well.

This timing is important because after the upcoming recess, there are only about nine weeks left in the Senate's legislative session for the year. During that time we have a full agenda containing many important items ranging from a budget to 13 appropriations bills to the lobbying reform and comprehensive immigration reform conference reports. There is also legislation on stem cell research and measures to help lower energy prices and health care costs. There are measures to provide for our veterans and to protect the privacy of all Americans. In this Committee, we want to get to patent reform legislation. There is much left to be done and not much time in which to do it. We need to prioritize and the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act should be a priority.

This Committee has tackled several complex and difficult issues with great success. Many people doubted that we could report out a bipartisan asbestos bill, but we did. Many doubted that we could report out a bipartisan immigration bill, but we did. Working together, we can proceed to report our bipartisan voting rights bill in time for Senate passage in July and enactment this year.

In the same way that we dedicated the month of May to immigration in this Committee, I suggested that we dedicate the month of June to the Voting Rights Act. Unfortunately, hearings were postponed and delayed and we have not yet reported the bill out of Committee. We have held seven hearings and received testimony from dozens of practitioners, academics and local officials. This solid record supports the reauthorization of the expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act.

The Senate has this year repeatedly considered partisan legislation that was doomed to failure, including two proposed constitutional amendments this month. I believe it is time for the "do nothing" Congress to join together. We can work together and enact this important guarantee of our fundamental right to vote and have our votes counted. The Voting Rights Act is a keystone of the body of civil rights laws that is helping implement a meaningful guarantee of equal protection of the law.

In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. noted that "[w]hen the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir." The Voting Rights Act is an important realization and guarantee of this promise.

Congress has reauthorized and revitalized the Act four times, each time with overwhelmingly bipartisan support pursuant to its constitutional powers. We need to do so again.

We have heard from numerous witnesses that if we fail to reauthorize the Act's expiring provisions, in particular sections 5 and 203, we risk our Nation backsliding on fundamental freedoms. As yesterday's Supreme Court decision demonstrates, the work of the Voting Rights Act remains incomplete. We must solidify the gains that we have been making as a Nation.

# # # # #