

Statement of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator
Vermont
July 19, 2006

Opening Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy

Ranking Member, Committee on the Judiciary

Executive Business Meeting

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I thank the Chairman for agreeing to my suggestion to meet today in a special session to consider our bipartisan, bicameral legislation to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act. Our bill is cosponsored by the Republican and Democratic leaders, by a bipartisan majority of this Committee and by a bipartisan majority of the Senate.

Our bill, S. 2703 is named for three civil rights leaders. Fannie Lou Hamer was a courageous advocate for the right to vote. She nearly gave her life to secure the right to vote for all Americans. Coretta Scott King was a tenacious fighter for equality through the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and up to her recent passing earlier this year. Everyone on this Committee can remember when less than a year ago, the body of Rosa Parks lay in state in the Capitol across the street, the first African-American woman so honored. Rosa Parks' dignified refusal to be treated as a second class citizen sparked the Montgomery bus boycotts that is often cited as the symbolic beginning of the modern civil rights movement.

Senator Salzar made what I believe is a good suggestion that I hope will be universally accepted. He suggested that we include an Hispanic civil rights leader in the naming of the bill, as well. On his behalf I will be prepared to ask that the name of Cesar Chavez be added to the name of our Senate bill.

The Voting Rights Act is the cornerstone of our civil rights laws. We honor these leaders, people of vision and strength, and those who died fighting with them by ensuring that their struggles are not forsaken, and not forgotten. We honor their legacy by reaffirming our commitment to protect the right to vote for all Americans.

Reauthorizing and restoring the Voting Rights Act is the right thing to do, not only for those who came before us, the brave people who fought for equality during the second reconstruction, but also for those who come after us, our children and our grandchildren. No one's right to vote should be abridged, suppressed or denied in the United States of America.

Last week, after months of work, the House of Representatives, led by Congressmen John Conyers, Mel Watt, John Lewis and Chairman Sensenbrenner, rejected all efforts to reduce the sweep and effect of the Voting Rights Act. We are fortunate to have on this Committee both Senators from the Badger State, both strong cosponsors of the bill. I commend the senior Senator, Senator Kohl, for his active support and leadership. He is a Senator universally known and respected as a man of ultimate fairness. I also thank Senator Feingold, the Ranking Member of the Constitution Subcommittee, for his characteristic diligence and principled action.

As Congressman John Lewis said, "When historians pick up their pens and write about this period, let it be said that those of us in the Congress in 2006, we did the right thing. And our forefathers and our foremothers would be very proud of us. Let us pass a clean bill without any amendments." Our bill passed the House of Representatives with 390 votes in favor after it rejected all four amendments offered there. I congratulate our House cosponsors on their successful efforts and hope that we can repeat them here in the Senate.

On May 2nd, our congressional leadership joined together on the steps of the Capitol to announce a bipartisan and bicameral introduction of the Voting Rights Act, it was an historic announcement and an occasion almost unprecedented during the last 5 years of partisanship.

Over the last four months this Committee has held 9 hearings into aspects of these matters and on the bill itself. In another indication of bipartisanship, those hearings have been chaired by a large number of Members of this Committee, including both Republicans and Democrats. No one can say that they hearings were not fairly conducted.

After almost a month to prepare for this markup, it is time for us to act. We have less than two dozen legislative days left in this session of Congress. The House of Representatives delayed consideration of the Voting Rights Act for a month due to Republican recalcitrance. We hope not to suffer the same delay. It is time for us to debate, consider and vote on this important legislation. We should pass the bill in the same form as the House so it will go directly to the President's desk by the August recess.

We cannot relent in our fight for the fundamental civil rights of all Americans. Working together, we should report out a clean, bipartisan voting rights bill. Congress has reauthorized and revitalized the Act four times, each time with overwhelmingly bipartisan support pursuant to its constitutional powers. This is no time for backsliding, this is the time to move forward together.

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