

Statement of

# The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator  
Vermont  
September 5, 2007

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Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee  
Hearing on "The 50th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1957  
And Its Continuing Importance"  
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This Sunday our Nation will mark the golden anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. It was the first major civil rights law passed since Reconstruction, and it remains one of the most important pieces of legislation this Committee and the Congress ever considered. Its story has been retold in the award-winning books *Master of the Senate* by Robert Caro and *Parting the Waters* by Taylor Branch.

With this hearing, we examine whether Federal civil rights enforcement has remained faithful to our goal of achieving equal justice for all. We meet with the Nation at a crossroads. Two years after the devastation from Hurricane Katrina, its aftermath and the failure of government to protect our citizens in the Gulf Coast and to help those displaced from the lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans and elsewhere, many Americans doubt our commitment to civil rights.

We have a Justice Department without effective leadership. The Attorney General, Deputy Attorney General, Associate Attorney General, Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights and many others have resigned in the wake of the scandals. And we have witnessed what appears to be the abandonment of the founding priorities of the Civil Rights Division. That Division, which has so often served as the guardian of the rights of minorities, has been subjected to partisan hiring practices and partisan litigation practices.

The flood of recent departures from the Justice Department, culminating in last month's resignation of the Attorney General and the Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division, underscore the Civil Rights Division's loss of direction and the shaken morale of dedicated career staff. We cannot allow the absence of meaningful enforcement to render our civil rights laws obsolete.

America has traveled a great distance on the path toward fulfilling the promise of equal justice under law, but we still have miles to go. Just last year, this Committee received extensive testimony during the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of continuing racial discrimination affecting voting. During last fall's election, we received reports about several efforts to intimidate Latino voters. These civil rights abuses ranged from false campaign mailings in Orange County, California to intimidation at the polls in Tucson, Arizona. An important legislative initiative is on our Committee agenda this week to try to stem deceptive voting practices and abuses still being practiced against minority voters. As long as the stain of discrimination remains on the fabric of our democracy, the march toward equal justice must continue.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 created an Assistant Attorney General dedicated solely to civil rights enforcement which led to the formation of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. It also provided the Justice Department with a new set of tools to prosecute racial inequality in voting. Although the Department had prosecuted some criminal cases since 1939, this law allowed the Department to bring civil actions on behalf of African-American voters. With this new authority, the Division worked to correct civil rights violations and helped set the stage for Congress to pass stronger legislation with respect to voting, housing, employment and other key areas in the decade of the 1960s.

Americans must remain steadfast in our commitment that every person - regardless of race, color, religion, or national origin - should enjoy the American dream free from discrimination. We should continue to expand that dream to fight discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation, as well. We should reaffirm our commitment to the promise of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. I hope that today's hearing is a step in doing so.

I welcome our distinguished panel of civil rights leaders and thank them for being with us today.

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