
Government of the District of Columbia



Executive Office of the Mayor

Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives

The Honorable Tom Davis, Chairman

***Voting Rights for the
District of Columbia***

Testimony of
Anthony A. Williams
Mayor
District of Columbia

Wednesday, June 23, 2004

Good morning. Chairman Davis and other members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. As Mayor of the District of Columbia, I represent 570,000 disenfranchised citizens of the United States of America. We are citizens in every sense of the word – we die for our country in war, we are active in civic life, we pay taxes – but this nation denies us a full voice in this very body. It is my firm belief that our lack of representation should rise to the level of personal outrage for District residents and all Americans who value equality and fairness.

So it is with a great sense of appreciation that I sit before you today to discuss four distinct efforts to end this great injustice. It is especially commendable that these bills have been introduced by both Democrats and Republicans, including three senior and influential members of the majority and the District's own nonvoting delegate. That they provide a wide spectrum of alternatives for moving towards representative democracy for the nation's capital is another indication that this issue is beginning to mature as a slight that requires a remedy. I credit the members of Congress who have authored them for their efforts at the forefront of the push for human and democratic rights for District residents. *The fact that we are having this hearing is a milestone.*

I would first like to commend Representative Regula and Representative Rohrbacher. Their bills offer opportunities for the District to achieve a full cohort of congressional representatives. They are variations on the theme of retrocession, although they do have fundamental differences. One commonality of the bills is that the District's congressional representation would be calculated as if the District were part of the State of Maryland. This approach could bring full congressional representation to the District in an expedient fashion, but the approach requires additional contemplation. Support among the peoples on both sides of the District line would need to be carefully gauged. Admittedly, some District residents might support these proposals, since they provide one version of a solution to nonrepresentation. However, I would be reluctant to support any initiative that has the potential to fragment the District's political identity. D.C. is a unique political and social unit that cannot be commingled with the interests of Maryland or any state. I would imagine that Maryland residents would also be divided on this issue. As honorable as their intentions may be, it is my belief that these bills are not workable and do not provide as desirable a solution as an initiative that would keep the District intact.

The bill introduced by Representative Davis would provide the District with one voting member in the House of Representatives. Obviously, this bill does not address the question of Senate representation, and thus does not provide a full solution to our disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, it does move the issue forward and I look forward to working with the chairman and this committee as it explores and attempts to resolve the outstanding constitutional, legal and political issues connected to this approach.

Representative Norton's bill provides the most comprehensive solution to our disenfranchisement insofar as it provides representation for the District in the House and the Senate. Admittedly, this bill faces perhaps the steepest climb of the four proposals, but oftentimes the most ambitious option requires the most work. I am grateful to

Senator Joe Lieberman who shepherded this bill through the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee several years ago.

As I stated before, each of these bills advances the cause of democracy in the Nation's Capital. We owe a debt of gratitude to the sponsors as well as a commitment to continue working together. I encourage the Congress to hold other hearings and work towards bipartisan support, if possible. This hearing is the beginning of what should be a spirited debate in this body and across the District on what solution should be pursued. The bi-partisan efforts here today are evidence that representation for the District can be a voting rights issue and not a partisan one.

The United States should be a beacon around the world for the virtues and inclusiveness of democracy. That light should shine the brightest at the core – right here in Washington, DC. It is the ultimate hypocrisy that its citizens suffer from the exact disenfranchisement this nation was founded to end. Let's work together to correct this injustice.