

Testimony of Ted Trabue on behalf of the Greater Washington Board of Trade

*For Presentation before the Committee on Government Reform,
U.S. House of Representatives; June 23, 2004*

Good morning. My name is Ted Trabue, and I am testifying today on behalf of the Greater Washington Board of Trade. The Board of Trade consists of 1,200 member businesses which, together, employ about 40 percent of the Washington region's private sector workforce. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on this most important issue to the employers and citizens of the District of Columbia.

The Board of Trade remains frustrated with the ongoing disenfranchisement of the District of Columbia. As the seat of our nation's government, our city has stood for 200 years as one of the world's grandest and most enduring icons of democratic aspiration. Over time, the laws passed here have validated and strengthened the notion of equal protection, have guided our nation's defense of human rights at home and abroad, and have served as a blueprint for other nations pursuing representative government.

It is, therefore, a profound irony that the residents of this great city have been denied the most fundamental right of a modern democracy – that of voting representation in their nation's legislative body. People who pay taxes to the Federal government and serve in its military, show up for jury duty and complete all other obligations of citizenship are denied a voice in Congress. This circumstance violates our nation's core democratic principles. As a practical matter, the absence of a locally-elected advocate in Congress acts to the disadvantage of those who live, work and employ people in the District.

For these reasons, the Board is heartened by the level of interest within Congress for a fair and practical remedy. The fact that we are here today to evaluate not one, but *four* possible scenarios for voting representation underscores the fact that the time for this idea has finally come. In the interest of time, I will briefly summarize the views of the Board of Trade on the bills before us today, as well as pending legislation.

H.R. 1285, No Taxation Without Representation Act of 2003

The Board of Trade enthusiastically supports Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton's legislation, which would grant the District of Columbia the full complement of congressional representation now enjoyed by the 50 states. Her plan reflects the longstanding views of this organization, and is consistent with the basic principle of equal representation.

H.R. 381, District of Columbia-Maryland Reunion Act

This legislation, which would return to Maryland much of the territory that now constitutes the District of Columbia, has received much serious consideration. The Board of Trade acknowledges that *retrocession* is an interesting strategy, with some historical precedent, to provide District citizens with voting representation in Congress.

Nonetheless, we believe this plan has too many political and practical hurdles to overcome to be a useful vehicle for solving the problem.

The sheer enormity of this change makes it nearly impossible to fathom. The context in which basic public services are now provided for 573,000 District residents would be fundamentally changed. The government that is now responsible for providing these services would be abolished, substantially changed, or required to fit into an unnatural relationship with Maryland State Government and 24 local jurisdictions. The balance of interests that defines Maryland politics would be seriously affected. This plan would not, we believe, be welcomed in Maryland.

Furthermore, we believe that the retrocession movement overlooks a very basic fact: that the District of Columbia is a distinct place with its own identity, traditions and folkways. Any attempt to shoehorn this most unique city into another state – one with its own character and customs – would detract from the identity of both.

H.R. 3709, The District of Columbia Voting Rights Restoration Act of 2004

We believe the proposal to allow the citizens of the District of Columbia to vote in Maryland congressional elections is intriguing, and also has some historical precedent, but may also be politically impractical. While this would be an interesting way to provide District residents with representation in the Senate, we are not sure it would be welcomed by Maryland. Furthermore, it does not address a basic principle – that citizens who participate fully in the rituals of democracy are entitled to representation congruent with the political jurisdiction that governs them, and are entitled to the chance to seek and hold office. While a District resident would be allowed to vote for Maryland members of Congress, he or she could not run for Congress from those jurisdictions.

The “Davis Plan”

While we understand that formal legislation has yet to be submitted, the Board of Trade is inclined to support a plan that has been developed by Chairman Davis. As we understand it, this plan would temporarily add two House seats -- one in Utah and the other in the District of Columbia. This plan, which would take effect next year and remain operative until the 2010 redistricting when the District’s seat would become permanent, could grant this city the locally-elected voice we deserve, while maintaining the existing partisan balance in the House.

As is so often the case, the first step is often the hardest. The fact is that this plan, too, has practical political obstacles that would have to be overcome. However, once the District of Columbia has that first locally elected member of Congress – one with the full privileges of membership – we believe the goal of securing two elected United States Senators will be far easier to attain. That goal of Senate representation is a goal we should not lose sight of if the District’s residents are to have a real voice in Congress. As long as it is understood that Chairman Davis’ plan is merely the beginning, and not the end of the process of attaining voting representation, we believe his is a pragmatic step in the right direction and we hope the issues of partisan parity can be worked out.

On behalf of the Board of Trade, I thank you for this opportunity to testify, and for your consideration of our testimony.

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