

**Statement of Ralph Nader on Statehood for the District of Columbia
To be submitted for the Record of the House Judiciary Committee Hearings
on September 19, 2019**

It is important for Democrats and Republicans to give voice to people whose voice is not heard inside the corridors of power. More than 600,000 of those people live in the District of Columbia. As the capital of this nation, the District is the symbol of the freedoms for which this nation stands. The light of democracy shines from the District, but does not illuminate this city. The core is hollow. The values of equality and political participation that the city promises are denied right here, in our nation's Capital.

Most Americans do not know, and many would find it hard to believe, that under our current system DC residents are second-class citizens. The District is denied local control - Congress must approve the District's budget, and can override any action of the city government. At the same time, District residents do not have even one voting representative in the Congress which controls them. DC is effectively a colony, with all local decisions directly subject to change by a Congress largely out of touch with local realities.

Here is an important issue, involving the democratic rights of over half a million people, and yet there has been no debate whatsoever, and most Americans are unaware of the issues involved. Statehood for the DC is a perfect issue for the Democratic Presidential Primary debates. All the Democratic Primary candidates for president should pledge to make District residents first-class citizens of the United States, or explain why they think District residents should continue to be denied rights that other Americans take for granted.

Most people who live outside of the District do not know that DC citizens pay more than \$2 billion a year in federal income taxes - more than several states - yet cannot elect people to decide how their money is spent. DC residents have served and died in our armed services over the last half century in disproportionately high numbers, but have no representation in the Congress that decides whether or not to go to war. The U.S. is the only democracy in the world that deprives the residents of its capital city the basic rights granted to other citizens.

Even more damaging than the lack of Congressional representation is the colonial-style control that Congress exerts over the District. Adding one, or three, DC representatives to the 535 members of Congress would, by itself, do little to solve this problem.

Unaccountable power is by its nature abusive. The places where unaccountable power is exercised are, and must be, dysfunctional. Unaccountable power is uninformed. Members of Congress don't know this city. They don't know what's right for its people. They approve the budget and all the legislation, but they do not themselves have to live with their decisions. They foist pet projects on citizens who are perfectly capable of deciding these issues locally. They prevent the District from taxing income where it is earned. They regularly overturn the judgment of local elected officials - on public health, tax, budget, school issues - all with impunity.

Unaccountable power is destructive. It chokes the ability and destroys the responsibility of people to govern themselves. There is no place in the world where second-class citizens live side by side with first-class citizens and fare as well. It just doesn't happen. What happens to a community where the

people cannot exercise authority, where there is no democracy? People stop participating. They don't run for local offices. The civic culture of the community withers away.

President Clinton objected to Congress's arbitrary use of its colonial power over the District. In 1999 he wrote a veto message chiding Congress for attempting to block District decisions that he correctly argued were local matters in the areas of: advocating statehood, access to special education, abortion, and drug policy, among other issues. But he did not aggressively push for full local control and self-determination for DC.

The results of Congressional interference and the inefficiency of colonial-style management are as distressing as they are predictable. I have often been criticized for saying that there are few major, real differences between the Democrats and the Republicans. On this issue, the difference between the Democrats and the Republicans is very clear: Republicans do not believe that District residents should have the right to full local control or self-determination, and they do not intend to do anything about the current situation; Democrats believed that District residents have the right to local control, but they also did not intend to do anything about the situation. Until now.

The District of Columbia has been taken for granted by the national Democratic party for too long. This is the year to send a message. Unfortunately, District voters don't have very many ways to send a message to the leaders in Washington, despite living in the shadow of the Capitol. Your local representatives have been disempowered, you have no voting representatives in Congress. Your best chance to send a message and make your voice heard is through your vote in the Presidential election.

I support full local control of the District of Columbia, outside of a small federal enclave. Furthermore, I support a referendum for the voters of the District to choose their future status. Statehood should be one of the options, as should a return to Maryland. I support statehood, but more than that, I support the right of DC voters to choose their own future.

To those who say that the District is too small to be a state, (two states have smaller populations) and propose other solutions, I say that Congress has lost the right to impose its will on DC: after 200 years of being second-class citizens, District residents have the right to choose for themselves.

To those who say that DC needs to get its house in order before we can move to full local control, I say, "voting is a right, not a privilege." As Eleanor Holmes Norton has said for years, local control is what will make it possible for the District to start fixing its problems. With legislative and appropriations delays, regular governing confusion, and Congressional interference eliminated, the District would be more able to deal with its pressing problems. The solution for the problems of democracy is more democracy!