

Chairman Bowen, members of the committee, and fellow Kentuckians:

We are Kentuckians. We believe a healthy democracy is essential for a good society. We also strongly believe that there are no throw-away people. All people have value and human dignity. And in America, all of us should have the right to vote.

Unfortunately, today in Kentucky nearly a quarter million of our friends and neighbors are denied the right to vote. The problem lies in our out-dated constitution, which permanently bans all people with a felony conviction from voting. HB 70 is a constitutional amendment to right this wrong. It would restore voting rights to most people once they finish their full sentence. The bill has passed the House 10 times in the past 9 years with wide bi-partisan support. But a few Senate leaders have blocked progress every year.

Now is the time for this committee and Senate as a whole to pass HB 70. Now is the time to let all Kentuckians have a vote on a constitutional amendment restoring voting rights to former felons. Now is the time for Kentuckians to stand up for a more just and inclusive democracy. Now is time to let us vote.

Some may say that speaking out in this way is not proper or appropriate. To those we respectfully say:

- We take this action out of respect for our friend April Browning, and too many others who are denied a voice and a vote in our communities. April wanted one thing: for her 13-year old son to see her vote. She passed away suddenly last year before that day ever came.
- We take this action to call upon the conscience of our Senators, especially those who are in the habit of looking the other way while Senate leaders block this bill, year after year. To paraphrase the Irish statesman Edmund Burke, “All that is required for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to do nothing.” Kentuckians need fewer bystanders in the Senate. We deserve many more champions who stand up for what is right and fair.
- We take this action because Kentucky is one of just three states that permanently takes away the right to vote from all people with a felony conviction; because one in five African-Americans in our state is denied the right to vote; and because the three million Kentuckians who can vote deserve the chance to have our say on a constitutional amendment to restore voting rights.

This coming Sunday, March 7th, marks the 50th anniversary of bloody Sunday, a day when 600 marchers, led by a young man named John Lewis, walked over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama to protest racial injustice and demand voting rights protections. They were met by waves of state troopers and local police. The police beat the nonviolent protesters with clubs, cracking skulls and hospitalizing more than 50 people. Months later, as a result of public pressure, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Five decades later, the members of the Kentucky Senate – and all Kentuckians – face a choice. Will we honor the legacy of that brave struggle for freedom and democracy by passing HB 70? Or will we continue to stand on the wrong side of history?

Congressman John Lewis has said, “the right to vote is precious – almost sacred – and the most powerful tool we have for non-violent social change.” We cannot go back. We must not go back. Let us vote.

Greg Capillo

Jordan Mazurek