

## **DC VOTE CHAMPIONS OF DEMOCRACY SPEECH 2006**

**Bruce V. Spiva, Chair, DC Vote Board of Directors  
October 24, 2006**

Tonight we come together both to celebrate our movement and to continue our protest for democracy.

First, we celebrate each other – the magnificent coalition represented by all of you in this room: civic and civil rights organizations, business and union leaders, public officials, activists, and ordinary residents. We may disagree about some issues. We may disagree at times about tactics. But we all stand here together tonight united behind a single goal: full democracy for the people of the District of Columbia.

We also celebrate the great progress we have made toward achieving our goal this year. We celebrate the historic markup of the D.C. Voting Rights Bill by the Government Reform Committee on an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 29-4. We celebrate because we may achieve enactment of the D.C. Voting Rights Act this year, a historic step forward for our movement which would give us a voting member in the United States House of Representatives for the first time in history.

But even as we celebrate our unity and our achievements, we are compelled to continue our protest for democracy. Why? In two short weeks, on Tuesday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, millions of Americans all over this country will exercise their fundamental right to vote for members of Congress. We, the people of the District of Columbia, once again will be completely shut out. We will be reduced to political bystanders in our own country. We are still exiles in our own land.

We protest because we, the people of the District of Columbia, have fought and died for our country in every war. We are fighting and dying now in Iraq and

Afghanistan. We fight for democracy abroad and are denied it at home. We pay federal and local taxes. We serve on federal juries. We have fulfilled *every* responsibility of American citizenship, and yet, we have no say in the passage of our nation's law, and, at bottom, do not even have ultimate authority over our own local laws and institutions. That is a moral disgrace and a shame on this nation. And we protest.

We protest because we want to make this country better. We want it to be *at least* as good as every other democracy in the world, not one of which denies the citizens of her capital the right to vote. This is not a local issue. We are fighting for the realization of our Country's core, founding principles: that every American citizen must have an equal right to vote, and that government without the consent of the governed is illegitimate. Some accuse us of being naïve – apparently the worst political sin in this town. But if we're naïve, Thomas Jefferson was naïve. If we are naïve, Abraham Lincoln was naïve. If we are naïve, the suffragettes and the civil rights activists were naïve. And yet they all changed this Country profoundly for the better against overwhelming odds.

Ever since the Declaration of Independence, each subsequent generation of activists and agitators – called “extremists” in their day – has worked to move our country closer to the glorious ideals set forth in that great founding document. All of them did so in the face of scorn and ridicule by many of their fellow citizens, despite prognostications about what was possible or achievable in their times, often against the sentiment and will of the majority, and even in the face of death. And while these victories seem to us “inevitable,” as do all *successful* revolutions in retrospect, at the time

these courageous activists fought for change, the changes they sought were viewed by many as “untimely,” “unrealistic,” even “extremist” or “radical.”

There are many, even friends of our cause, who believe this battle is unwinnable. This has led too many of our fellow citizens, not from apathy but from a sense of despair over the prospects for success, to drop out of the struggle for voting rights. I am convinced that they are mistaken in their pessimism and that we must motivate them to engage in this struggle again.

We still have a long road to walk together and at times it may feel we are walking against a gale wind. But we are the heirs to that first revolution and to those later struggles that brought our Country closer to our founding ideals. And we too will succeed in our ultimate goal of securing full and equal representation. Being right and being organized and having the *courage* to fight can and will create the momentum for change.