

Plaskett Op-Ed: Disenfranchisement on Display

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This past week, we have inaugurated the 46th President and the 49th Vice President of the United States—Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris. Over the past few years, our beloved democracy has been beleaguered and challenged, and in the last few days the ideals and structure of our democracy have been physically attacked - incited by the outgoing President. It seems that not since the American Revolution has there been such a great need to shield and protect the ideals that our Founding Fathers and ancestors fought to preserve.

There is, however, still a very troubling reality that continuously exist for the 4 million Americans who live in U.S. territories—second-class citizenship and the lack of the right to vote for the U.S. President. Deeply rooted in the fabric of the stilted development of territories like my home, the U.S. Virgin Islands, are a series of decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court between 1901 and 1905, known as the Insular Cases. Those cases (written by the same justice who wrote Plessy v. Ferguson) justified racist, imperialist policy toward U.S. territories. Prior to these landmark

decisions, the Northwest Ordinance of 1789 allowed new territories acquired by the United States a clear path to statehood: Congress would appoint a governor and judges for the territory and then establish civil rights. Once the population of that territory exceeded 5,000 adult males, voters could then elect a legislature and send a non-voting delegate to Congress. Ultimately, if or when the territory reached a population of 60,000, the territory could petition for statehood and possibly become a state. With the precedent set by the Insular Cases, this ordinance was all but forgotten, leaving us in a perpetual state of second-class citizenship.

Our limited rights as U.S. citizens shamelessly flies in the face of the countless sacrifices made by the men and women from the Virgin Islands who serve in the United States Armed Forces, National Guard and Reserve, in greater numbers per capita than those in the continental United States. My father, grandfather, uncles and many family members have fought for and pledged allegiance to a Commander-In-Chief that they could not vote for. Most recently, Virgin Islands and other territorial National Guard troops proudly reported to our nation's Capitol this month to serve and protect Congress and the Inaugural proceedings, protecting with their lives a presidential transfer they were not a part of and process they are given limited rights to be engaged in. This is disenfranchisement on display. It is a shameful reproach and stain on the legacy of this great nation that must finally be addressed. It is my hope and prayer that as President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris take office, they will lead us into a future that is more just and equitable for all.

Submitted on Tuesday by: *Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett.*

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