

should be deeply concerned by this discouraging trend, we should also recognize where progress is being made.

On January 8, the people of Sri Lanka stunned a repressive government that had been rapidly centralizing power and dismantling democratic institutions. President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who sensed his increasing unpopularity, called a snap election 2 years early hoping to take advantage of his fragmented opposition. However, to his surprise and the surprise of many observers, a broad coalition of Sri Lankans voted to oust his administration and to chart a new course. Rather than balk at forfeiting the chance for an unprecedented third term, President Rajapaksa, under pressure from the international community, stepped down within hours of the election results being published.

This was welcome news. After suffering decades of on-and-off conflict that is estimated to have cost as many as 100,000 lives, only to have the violence replaced by increasing repression and political and ethnic polarization, the peaceful transfer of power has helped breathe life into the hopes of Sri Lankans for reconciliation and a better future. For that hope to become reality, newly elected President Maithripala Sirisena will need to gain the trust of all Sri Lankans, regardless of their ethnicity or political views. In too many countries democracy has been treated as an election rather than a way of governing, but for it to succeed all citizens must have the ability to participate meaningfully. As President Sirisena stated in his inaugural address, what Sri Lanka needs “is not a King, but a real human being”.

Of course, democracy alone will not heal Sri Lankan society. No one knows this better than those who lost family, friends, and loved ones in the war with the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers. In the final months of that war, many thousands of civilians died, mostly as a result of shelling by the Sri Lankan military of civilians who had been uprooted by the fighting. The United Nations, the United States, other governments and human rights organizations have long called for thorough, independent investigations and punishment of those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

While President Sirisena has pledged to launch a domestic inquiry into alleged war crimes, I agree with those who insist that nothing less than an international investigation, as called for by the U.N. Human Rights Council, will likely suffice to overcome the suspicion and distrust concerning this issue. It would be far better if the government seeks the assistance of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in developing a credible plan for investigating violations of human rights by both sides in the conflict, and holding those responsible accountable.

I am encouraged that President Sirisena has pledged to return the country to a parliamentary democracy

with independent police and judicial institutions, and inclusive governance. He has also committed to taking steps to address the cases of those detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, PTA, many of whom are political prisoners like Jeyakumari Balendran. The reviews should be carried out expeditiously. While the release of 572 prisoners at the time of Pope Francis’s visit on January 14 was a positive step, it is the cases of political prisoners detained under the PTA that will demonstrate the Sirisena government’s commitment to reconciliation. The sooner innocent victims of the Rajapaksa government’s repression are freed, the faster Sri Lanka will be able to recover.

Over the years I have spoken in this Chamber in support of independent investigations of war crimes and justice and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. I have met the relatives of victims of the war. President Sirisena’s election offers the chance for all Sri Lankans to finally recover from that tragic period by rebuilding their country in a spirit of tolerance, respect, and common purpose.

FIXING NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: INNOVATION TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a copy of my remarks at the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee hearing yesterday be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

FIXING NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND: INNOVATION TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

This is the 27th hearing in the last six years about fixing No Child Left Behind or a related elementary and secondary education issue. I hope we are not far from a conclusion—from moving from hearings and discussions to marking up a bill. From the beginning of our work on No Child Left Behind, we concluded it would be better, rather than start from scratch on a new Elementary and Secondary Education Act, to identify the problems in the law and try to fix them. Generally speaking, we agree on the problems, and on several solutions we are not far from reaching consensus. We still have some work to do on accountability. And by accountability, I mean goals, standards, annual tests, disaggregated reporting of test results, and defining success or failure for teachers and schools as well as the consequences of that success or failure. On some of these things, we pretty much agree, like the need for a new goal. On other things, we still have some work to do, like whether or not to keep the 17 annual federal standardized tests.

This morning we are holding a roundtable discussion on “Fixing No Child Left Behind: Innovation to Better Meet the Needs of Students.” We aim for this to be different than a hearing. Senator Murray and I will each have a short opening statement and then we will introduce our roundtable of participants. Then we’re going to jump right into the conversation, posing two questions to help guide the discussion.

First, what is your state, district, or school doing to implement innovative ap-

proaches to improve academic outcomes for students, particularly low-income and at-risk students? Second, how can we improve the federal law to encourage more states, districts, and schools to innovate?

And when I say law, I should also draw attention to the regulations that have followed these laws. For example, every state has to submit a plan to the federal government to receive its share of the \$14.5 billion Title I program distributed to states for low-income children. That’s about \$1,300 for every child who lives at or below the federal poverty line. Those Title I applications are reviewed by the Department of Education, as well as by outside experts, before you can spend a dime of that money. In addition, 42 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico are operating under waivers from the out-of-date and unworkable regulations in No Child Left Behind. To receive those waivers, states have to submit waiver applications. In Tennessee, that waiver application was 91 pages long with more than 170 pages of attachments. Since 2012, the state has had to submit eight different updates or amendments to the plan.

In addition to all this, the U.S. Department of Education spends another \$9–10 billion or so on about 90 different programs that are either authorized or funded under No Child Left Behind, with separate application and program requirements. These programs include Promise Neighborhoods and Investing in Innovation.

So are we spending this money in a way that makes it easier or harder for you to innovate and achieve better academic outcomes?

My own view is that the government ought to be an enabler and encourager, rather than a mandater, of innovation. It can do this well. For example, last year Congress overwhelmingly supported reauthorizing the Child Care and Development Block Grant program that gives grants to states that allow parents to receive a voucher for the child care of their choice so they can attend school or go to work.

Seven decades ago the G.I. Bill enabled World War II veterans to attend a college of their choice, helping them become the greatest generation. Today, half our college students have federal grants or loans that follow them to the colleges of their choice, enabling them to buy the surest ticket to a better life and job. About 98 percent of the federal dollars that go to higher education follow the student to the school they attend. In K–12, the only money that follows students to the school they attend is the school lunch program.

Now, I’ll turn to Ranking Member Murray for her opening statement and then we’ll get the conversation going.

SCHOOL CHOICE

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a copy of my remarks at the Brookings Institution earlier today be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

SCHOOL CHOICE

I am delighted to be here, but I should warn you: Based on my track record, I’m probably not your most reliable observer on school choice.

If I take you back to September 1992, I gave a speech at Ashland University in Ohio, and I predicted that by the year 2000 “school choice will not be an issue.”

I suggested that an Ashland student writing a thesis in 2000 ought to make the subject parental choice of schools, because by then, I said, “It will be a matter of history.