TRIBUTE TO AMBASSADOR BATU KUTELIA

Mr. KERRY. Mr. President, I rise today to mention a distinguished Ambassador who is leaving Washington after a regrettably short tenure. Batu Kutelia, Ambassador of Georgia to the United States, is returning to his country to assume an important post in his government as Deputy National Security Adviser.

Although Ambassador Kutelia was only in Washington as Ambassador for less than 2 years, he and his wife Sofia and their young family will be missed by the many friends they leave behind. He will also be remembered for reinforcing and advancing his country’s relations with the United States.

Ambassador Kutelia represented Georgia in Washington in challenging times. Following the 2008 war with Russia, in which he served as First Deputy Minister of Defense, the Ambassador helped facilitate the economic and political assistance necessary to rebuild and continue Georgia’s economic development. He also ensured that Georgia’s agenda within the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, with which the Ambassador helped secure, was advanced.

Ambassador Kutelia’s work with our government on the training of Georgian forces participating in the NATO International Security Assistance Force mission expedited their successful deployment to Afghanistan.

Although Kutelia possesses a sophisticated understanding of Congress and its responsibilities within our democratic system, he was extremely accessible, maintaining strong working relationships and friendships with many Members and staff. During the Ambassador’s tenure, it is a fact that Georgia had a persuasive and effective representative whose passion for his nation never flagged and whose engagement with Congress far exceeded that of bigger countries with much larger embassies. Rarely did a Georgian official pass through Washington without at least one interaction with Congress, an admirable record which did a great deal to solidify and enhance engagement between the United States and the country of Georgia.

Many of us on Capitol Hill have come to know and respect Georgia and its people. Georgia’s future will be written by young leaders such as Batu Kutelia. I cannot help but believe that the country’s future will be bright if it continues to produce leaders of his caliber. I wish him the best at his coming service in Tbilisi.

DON’T ASK, DON’T TELL

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, the repeal of the discriminatory don’t ask, don’t tell law will mean a stronger and more successful military and national security by hampering military readiness. While the repeal of this law is overdue, ending this harmful policy does mark an important moment in the fight for equal rights for all Americans. I applaud all those who worked to overturn this policy, the many Americans who advocated for its repeal, and the patriotic men and women who will now be able to openly serve their country.

ALASKA CONSERVATION PARITY ACT

Mr. BEGICH. Mr. President, I want to take this opportunity to discuss an issue of importance to Alaska Native communities. The legislation currently under consideration would extend through 2011 the enhanced tax incentive for donations of qualified conservation easements. Unfortunately, Alaskan Native communities are ineligible under this provision and, as a result, do not have access to the tools they need to permanently protect historic and subsistence lands.

For thousands of years, Alaska has been home to Native communities, whose rich heritages, languages, and traditions have thrived in the region’s unique landscape. These communities continue to engage in a traditional subsistence lifestyle and to harvest their food from the land. Nearly 70 percent of Native communities’ food comes from the land and, for many communities, subsistence is an economic necessity considering the cost and difficulty involved in delivering food.

I, along with my colleague, Ms. Murkowski, have proposed legislation, S. 1673, which would provide parity. Our proposal is imperative to the long-term survival of Alaska-Native communities and Alaska’s nature resources, which makes this critical legislation timely.

Development pressures are increasingly significantly in many parts of Alaska. This legislation will allow private landowners and organizations to pass through the federal government the conservation easements on their land, ensuring that Native communities to be protected, while facilitating development that will spur needed economic activity and job growth.

We have worked with the Senate Finance Committee over the past 2 years to ensure that this provision is ready for enactment. It is widely supported by the conservation community. I was hopeful it would be included in the end-of-the-year tax package the Senate is currently considering. Since the Senate was unable to address Alaska Native conservation parity before the end of the 111th Congress, I would be interested in learning, from the chairman of the Finance Committee, what his plans are for advancing the proposal in the 112th Congress.

Mr. BAUCUS. I am happy to respond to Mr. Begich from Alaska. I support the conservation easement deduction and sympathize with the Senator’s efforts. I will work with Mr. Begich and Ms. Murkowski to address conservation issues in the new Congress.

Mr. BEGICH. I thank you, Mr. Baucus. I appreciate the Senator’s support on this issue, and look forward to working with him and my other colleagues to pass this much needed piece of legislation as soon as an opportunity presents itself in the new Congress.