

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee
On Voting in Opposition to Cloture on the Committee Reported Substitute to S. 178
March 17, 2015**

One of the lessons that I have learned in my time as a Senator is that if you listen to the people you serve, really listen to them, you will almost always do the right thing. This morning, as some Senators are trying to shut off debate and end our efforts to provide a comprehensive, victim-centered response to the horrible crime of human trafficking, I ask that we stop and listen. Listen to the voices of the survivors. What they are saying is clear: Please stop playing politics with our lives.

Holly Austin Smith, a survivor – a girl who ran away at the age of 14 and was bought and sold for sex – put it this way: **“Politics should not govern the options available to victims of sex trafficking – especially when such victims often have had their basic human rights taken away by criminals who had only their own agendas in mind.”**

We must put aside *our* agendas and stand with these survivors. They are asking for us to vote against this bill because it includes unnecessary and destructive partisan language.

A letter signed by the Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking, Rights for Girls, Shared Hope International, Polaris, and nearly 100 other anti-trafficking groups says this: **“We urge all members of the Senate to turn away from this divisive debate and find a bipartisan approach to this new initiative to protect and serve the needs of survivors.”**

Two years ago the Senate came together and passed an expansive new authorization of the Violence Against Women Act. I worked for months with the remarkable people of the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence, a coalition of thousands of organizations that represents millions of victims of domestic and sexual violence and the professionals who serve them. They spent hours upon hours carefully explaining what more we needed to do to ensure that we protected all victims – and we listened. Together we crafted a bill that responded to those needs. I trust these advocates. They have dedicated their lives to making sure that survivors have a voice. And here is what they are telling us:

“We write today to express our deep concern about the controversy of inserting the Hyde provision into the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act. The House passed a version of that Act that did not include this new Hyde provision and we ask the Senate to do the same.”

They are right. The House version of the very bill we are debating today does *not* contain this unnecessary and destructive provision. That deeply divided body came together and passed this bill with a unanimous vote just a few weeks ago. I am confident that we could move forward and take up the other important amendments before us if it were not for this divisive provision that Senator Cornyn has insisted be in the Senate bill.

I want to make clear to everyone who is paying attention to this vote, the partisan provision embedded in the Senate version of this bill is not something the survivors of human trafficking are asking for. It is not something the experts in the field who work with them every day are asking for. In fact, those who are closest to the damage wreaked by this terrible crime *are asking us to take the provision out*. We are not talking about taxpayer money. We are talking about money collected from the very offenders who have already controlled too much of the lives of these women and girls. These survivors deserve more options, not fewer.

It is in response to the request of these human trafficking survivors that I am opposing cloture on this version of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act. I support the rest of this bill and that is why I included it in the comprehensive substitute amendment that I filed last week. Also included in my substitute is a vital component to *prevent* human trafficking by focusing on runaway and homeless youth. These children are exceptionally vulnerable to human traffickers and we must not turn our back on them.

If we are serious about helping to end this heinous crime, we must stop playing politics and start listening. The survivors are telling us what they need. Let us hear them. I will vote no on cloture so that we can move forward and return to the bipartisan path that we have always walked on this issue.

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