



**Transcript:
Senator Peter Welch's First Speech**

Thank you, Madam President. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Senate today as Vermont's new Senator, and I hope to express how I will serve Vermont and our country, and I will outline the challenges we face as a governing body, and as a nation.

Most importantly, I will state why I believe that the United States Senate can be an institution that renews the strength and vitality of the democracy that all of us— whoever we represent, and whatever views we advocate—depend on for our mutual benefit.

But before I begin, I would like to say that my heart today is with the people of Vermont. They are grappling with the brutal flooding that hit us last week.

When I came to the floor last week after touring the damage in Vermont, I pledged that—along with Senator Sanders and Congresswoman Balint—we will do everything in our power to get the people of Vermont the resources that they need to build back from this.

And I make that pledge again today, and I appreciate the leadership of our senior senator, Senator Sanders, in advocating for Vermont as we recover from this real crisis.

And I also appreciate the offers of help from so many of my colleagues here in the Senate.

One of the first members who approached me was Senator Kennedy from Louisiana—a state that has had to deal with more than its share of natural calamities. Vermonters, Madam President, have always supported emergency aid when disaster struck others. Senator Sanders and I are very grateful for so many assurances of support now that Vermonters face their own huge recovery challenge.

Madam President, I recently heard our colleague, Senator Eric Schmitt from Missouri, give his First Speech. He spoke with real respect and reverence for the people of Missouri. Hard working, honest, family and community-oriented, and very generous.

And I felt Senator Schmitt's deep connection to the people who sent him here. In that respect, Senator Schmitt spoke for me.

In fact, I think he spoke for all of us. And Sen. Schmitt and I, and all of us, share something else: the citizens that we represent, despite many differences on many issues, share common needs—all the things that families and communities need—affordable housing, safe schools, good health care, a secure environment for our kids, good jobs where you can pay your monthly bills and have a little left over at the end of the month. We share that in common.

So the question I have is this: if we share so much— respect for the citizens who sent us here and our commitment to their shared aspirations—why can't we make *more* progress? Why are we so divided?

And Madam President, I believe there are two reasons:

First: Our democracy is more imperiled at this time than at any time since our civil war; and

Second: Working and middle-class Americans have been treading water economically for the past 40 years. Top-down economic policies have failed them.

So the towns many of us grew up in—with diverse economies, and vibrant downtowns, farms, and factories that support our communities are vanishing.

And many Americans, no matter how hard they work, still struggle to pay their bills.

So Madam President, our challenge is strengthening our democracy and improving the living standards for everyday Americans. And we must do both or we won't do either.

Democracy depends on trust. It also depends on results. If conditions stagnate for working Americans and they fall further behind, their trust in democracy will begin to erode.

And we need democracy to ensure that working families have a seat at the table when their aspirations are at stake.

Madam President, as a young person, I was the beneficiary of the fruits of democracy.

I grew up in the 1960s, one of six kids in an Irish Catholic family, in Springfield, Massachusetts. It was stable and secure. When I was asked where I was from, I answered by giving the name of my Catholic parish, Holy Name, not the city of my birth.

The sense of community was paramount. Helping a neighbor is what you did, reflexively and always.

And when I was a boy, my mother did something that only later did I realize what a profound impact it had on me. She taught me what small 'd' democracy meant in practice. When I was in grammar school, I didn't know what abortion was. I did know my parents, churchgoing Catholics, were against it. It was also illegal in Massachusetts at that time and a neighbor across the street went to jail for performing abortions.

My mother made dinner every night for our family of eight and every week she sent me across the street with another hot dinner for our neighbors while their parent was 'away' for a while.

When I think back at what my mother did, I really hope I can follow her example.

Instead of vilifying our neighbor with whom she disagreed on something that was really important to her, she made the family dinner, and helped a neighbor and their family through a very difficult time.

And Madam President, wouldn't democracy be stronger?

Wouldn't our communities be stronger?

If we made dinner,

Or gave a ride to the post office,

Or helped out with childcare,

for someone who needed a hand,

Even if we disagreed with them?

Madam President, later I attended Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, like my father and my three brothers.

In those college years two great issues captured my attention: the war in Vietnam and civil rights.

And as I was finishing up my second year at Holy Cross, I learned of a community organizing project in the Lawndale neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago.

It was led by a Jesuit seminarian that was affiliated with Martin Luther King Junior's Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

I was really interested, and I hitchhiked 900 miles from Springfield, Mass. to Chicago, Illinois.

It really changed my life.

Lawndale was poor. It was ignored by City Hall. We students went door to door asking about concerns and when the lack of sanitation services emerged as an issue, we got together with neighborhood folks and we trucked trash from Lawndale to City Hall. If the City wouldn't pick up the trash in Lawndale, we'd bring it to City Hall.

It caught the mayor's attention. The next week there was a caravan of Chicago Sanitation trucks throughout Lawndale.

It worked, but our fight didn't stop at trash pick-ups.

Just before I was to return to Holy Cross for my Junior Year, we discovered that unscrupulous folks in real estate were brutally exploiting Black families who were moving into Lawndale through a practice what we now know as 'redlining', and they were doing it with the active help of the Federal Housing authority and with the downtown big banks.

I was really shocked at the injustice.

And what was most shocking to me then, as an idealistic and eager young person who was accustomed to being treated fairly, was that this immense infliction of suffering on those families was legal.

It was legal for banks and the FHA to deny mortgages on the basis of the color of that person's skin.

So, I had to make a decision at that point. It was time to return to Holy Cross for my Junior Year. But that would come with a cost: abandoning the neighborhood folks whose hopes we had helped raise that they could get relief from these oppressive contracts.

That felt wrong.

Or I could drop out of Holy Cross and continue my community organizing work. That came with a risk then. Losing my student deferment and being drafted, as many of my high school classmates had been, to go to Vietnam, a war that so many of us opposed.

That it felt right to stay and continue my work.

And I stayed in Chicago.

During that next year we created a successful, neighborhood-led organization called the Contract Buyers League.

We exposed the rip off contracts, demonstrated in front of the big downtown banks, the Federal Housing Authority. We picketed in the serene north shore neighborhoods of the contract sellers—exposing what they had done, an exposure that was long overdue.

In short, Madam President, we really raised hell. Or as John Lewis would say: good trouble.

But we succeeded in getting then-Mayor Daley to help us renegotiate these contracts and substitute them with legitimate mortgages that folks should've had in the first place. It made a big difference in the lives of many residents of Lawndale.

And it certainly made a difference in my life.

I saw the power of a community coming together. And I saw how democracy was effective when people cooperated, when they did work together.

And in seeing how much injustice was actually legal, is when I made a lifelong commitment to two things:

The law: If I became a lawyer, I could use the legal system to help people hurt by bad laws.

And politics—If I ran for the legislature, I could work to change laws to address injustice and create opportunity and strengthen communities.

My years of service—as a community organizer in Chicago, as a State Senator in Vermont, as a Member of the House of Representatives—has taught me that democracy is more than an ideal we strive for; it is the tool we use to make meaningful differences in the lives of people we love and in the lives of people we may never meet.

Madam President, we must preserve our democracy, so that hardworking Americans can finally gain economic security—the ability to pay those bills and have a little left over—and the ability to build stable communities. And hopefully, these communities can grow and thrive so that one day, if their kids decide to stay or they leave and return, they can do so with a decent job and promising opportunities.

And as U.S. Senators, each of us has a unique and urgent opportunity to revitalize our democracy and improve prospects for our constituents.

Now let me acknowledge candidly: we have within this body and within this country very substantial differences on many ideological issues.

But we also have many areas of agreement.

You know, the folks in Katie Britt's Alabama and John Fetterman's Pennsylvania and the folks in my state of Vermont, they need and deserve the same things: affordable childcare so parents can work; they need affordable homes and apartments; they

need the security that when they drop their child off at the bus stop or at school that child's going to return home safely. These are the building blocks of strong community.

These are among the issues that the U.S. Senate should debate. You know it is said that the U.S. Senate is the greatest deliberative body. That's something we know is very much now in dispute.

But we do have the power to make it so. And in doing so we can help restore democracy.

We can debate those issues and others on the Senate floor:

Should social media companies enjoy legal immunity for anything their algorithms promote?

Should we work for a sustainable budget but talk about spending and revenues?

Is it acceptable that we have the most expensive health care system in the world that leaves so many people behind?

How do we act immediately and effectively to stop climate change from burning up the planet?

The Senate can deliberate, and it can and should debate.

But, Madam President, deliberation should be in service of making a good decision, it should be in service of achieving an outcome.

It should not be a device by which delay is endless, and resolution, nonexistent.

Every Senator I know is genuinely honored to be serving in this body.

Every Senator takes her and his responsibility very seriously.

But every Senator, I know, realizes that the honor of service is hollow unless we get good things done. That's our job.

And as a Senator, I will use the valuable lessons of democracy I have learned...

From my parents, the importance of helping a neighbor you may disagree with

From my time in Chicago, the power of democracy in action

And from Vermont, struggling today with the onslaught of the flood, the strength of community that shows us that even on the toughest of days the ability we can achieve when we work together.

While we in this county and in this Senate may face significant challenges, we have opportunities to succeed if we face those challenges together.

Madam President, I yield back.