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Personal Privilege Speech
83rd Legislative Session, First Called Special Session
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I am speaking to you because I am deeply disappointed in the events that took place at the State Affairs hearing on Thursday. In reaction to learning that the abortion regulation bills would be heard in committee, hundreds of women and men traveled to the Capitol to speak out. As you all know, normally as the testimony on a bill goes on, our iPads show the number of remaining witnesses going down. On Thursday, though, that number kept creeping up. The vast numbers of witnesses, their willingness to travel across this immense state, and their patience while waiting hours to testify was nothing short of inspiring. Those witnesses who got a chance to testify shared compelling stories made up of some of the most intimate details of their lives. Women shared their deeply personal stories publicly because they thought that in doing so, they could make a difference. Instead of leaving with the rewarding feeling that they had spoken on an issue important to them, these witnesses got the message from their state leaders that their personal stories were repetitive, and that they did not add to the discussion of the bill. Members, in my nearly 20 years in the House, I have never seen anything like this: not this level of participation in a hearing, nor this level of disrespect for witnesses. I hate to think that those who came to testify will be discouraged from civic engagement in the future because of their experience at their Texas capitol this week. We owed it to those who had traveled from all over the state, and who had waited for 15 hours or more to testify, to give them a chance to speak. Cutting off their testimony arbitrarily makes a farce of the system.

Hearing public testimony on bills is an important part of our process. It gives us a chance to learn from the people who will be affected by the bills we consider. Testimony can show us how a change in the law will actually impact a person's life. Thus, public testimony is always important. In this case, the bills we are considering deal with a Constitutional right, making public input all the more important. We should not turn people away.

Everything about the process related to these abortion regulation bills has smelled like partisan politics. First, each of these measures failed in the regular session. Adding these items to the call of the special session circumvents the democratic process set forth by our House rules. Second, special sessions are about emergency items, and even then this legislation wasn't added to the call until the second half of the special session. Nothing about these bills is an emergency. Surely the expansive public opposition to the bills demonstrates that. Third, these bills were set for the major state calendar in yet another move to rush them through the process. We know that the provisions in the bills are tough to swallow when even Senate Republicans had trouble accepting them. They had to meet unexpectedly behind closed doors for hours to work out an agreement. They stripped off a major provision of the bill for expediency before the senate finally passed the bill.

Proponents of the bill have failed to demonstrate any evidence that the regulations imposed by these bills are necessary. Nor have they expressed any sign of responsible governance in ensuring that women will continue to be able to access safe and legal abortion care, which is a right protected by our constitution. They have also failed to demonstrate support from Texans as a whole.

If these measures are an emergency, why doesn't the medical community support them? Why have the Texas Medical Association, Texas Hospital Association, and American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists put their opposition in writing in statements sent to us?

If these measures are an emergency, why did people show up in droves to oppose them at the State Affairs hearing? The committee report shows that 613 people registered on HB 60. A whopping 92 percent of them opposed the bill.

If these measures are an emergency, why don't Texans as a whole support them? Make no mistake. It's not just people who feel strongly about the issue who oppose the bills. Texas voters as a whole see no need for them. A survey was conducted last week of a representative sample of registered voters in Texas: 49-percent of those surveyed self-identify as Republicans, 37 percent as Democrats. 46 percent identify as conservative, 33 percent as moderate, and 15 percent as liberal. These voters expressed that 63 percent believe that the state already has enough restrictions on abortion. 71 percent believe that the Governor and legislature should be more focused on the economy and jobs. A majority -- 51 percent -- oppose the legislation we will vote on today.

The truth is that these bills aren't about women's health and they aren't about the will of the people. They are about winning Republican primaries. One need only look at Lt. Governor Dewhurst's tweet that reveals his real motive to close abortion clinics to know that. Texas women deserve better than to be used as a tool in partisan politics. The constituency of Texas expands beyond Republican primary voters. The majority cannot ignore the rest of Texans.

This isn't about what the state wants; it's about what republican primary voters want. Let me remind you that you also have to convince general election voters to vote for you. Texas women certainly won't forget to remind you of that.

Jessica Farrar
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