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JUSTICE NEWS

Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund Awards Gala 2013

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Thank you, John, for those kind words – and thank you all for such a warm welcome. It's a pleasure to be in such great company this evening. And it's a privilege to join so many friends, colleagues, committed partners, and distinguished award recipients for tonight's important celebration.

I'd like to thank Tom Saenz for his strong leadership since becoming President and General Counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund in 2009. I'd like to acknowledge the hard work of MALDEF's national Board of Directors, regional office leaders, professional staff, supporters, and sponsors – not only in ensuring that this organization remains America's leading "law firm of the Latino community," but in advancing equality, opportunity, and justice. And I'd like to thank tonight's honorees – Anna Maria Chávez, Director Mayorkas, and my good friend Secretary Salazar – for their leadership of these essential efforts; for the remarkable achievements we've gathered to celebrate; and for the service that each of them has rendered – to their communities and their country – by helping to build engagement, address disparities, and overcome injustice wherever it is found.

Tonight's Awards Gala presents an important opportunity for everyone here to renew our shared commitment to this work – and to the cause of equality that we've come together to advance. This cause has served as a unifying vision, and a rallying cry, since the day MALDEF was founded – four and a half decades ago – when a group of concerned citizens gathered in San Antonio, Texas, to put forward a vision of hope in a time of difficulty, and a year defined by national tragedy.

During the spring and summer of 1968 – with the shocking murders of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy – the country, and the Civil Rights Movement, were badly shaken. In cities and towns across America, peaceful activists faced misguided legal actions, abusive words, and threats of violence. In East Los Angeles, California, thousands of Latino high school students walked out of their classrooms to protest discrimination in the public school system. And, although our nation had made significant strides since the days of Bull Connor, the Freedom Rides, and the bombing of the 16 th Street Baptist Church – in 1968, the future of the progress to which Dr. King, Senator Kennedy, and so many others had dedicated their lives was anything but certain.

Yet MALDEF's founders were not only undaunted – they were defiantly optimistic. With assistance from the Ford Foundation, and help from other civil rights groups – such as LULAC and the NAACP – MALDEF built a strong base of support and began to intervene in civil legal aid cases. Over the next 45 years – as this organization grew, and its work broadened – your dedication to the values of equity and inclusion has remained steadfast. Through educational outreach, legislative advocacy, community engagement, and principled litigation, you've consistently fought to secure the rights of immigrants and underserved populations. You've played a key role in high-profile policy debates and Supreme Court cases. And you've taken difficult stands – often against long odds and steep opposition – to expand education and employment, to bridge longstanding divisions, and to see that justice is done.

In a variety of ways, MALDEF has helped to bring about meaningful changes – from America's schools and workplaces, to our housing and lending markets, border areas, and immigrant communities. Time and again, you've stood up – and spoken out – for equal opportunity and equal rights. And as we assemble tonight, here in our nation's capital, your efforts are continuing to make a powerful difference – particularly when it comes to our ongoing struggle to safeguard the single most fundamental, and most powerful, right of American citizenship: the right to vote.

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constitutionality of one of our most effective tools for preventing discrimination in our elections systems: Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This landmark provision was a signature achievement of the Civil Rights Movement. It requires all or parts of 15 states with histories of discrimination to obtain approval, from either the Justice Department or a panel of federal judges, for any proposed changes in voting procedures or practices – including redistricting plans, early voting procedures, and photo identification requirements – some of which may disproportionately impact young, poor, elderly, and minority voters.

There has long been a national, bipartisan consensus that this important law is not only necessary – but good – for our democracy. Unfortunately, despite this consensus, and the overwhelming Congressional majority that voted to reauthorize the Voting Rights Act in 2006, the Supreme Court recently heard a case challenging Section 5 – contending that it is no longer constitutional, and arguing that our nation has moved beyond the realities that prompted its passage and its recent renewal.

Let me be clear: while this country has indeed changed, and real progress has been made – thanks to groups like MALDEF and many others – we are not yet at a point where the most vital part of the Voting Rights Act can be described as unnecessary or a product of a flawed political process. That's why today's Justice Department has vigorously defended Section 5 as an indispensable tool for eradicating discriminatory election practices. It's why MALDEF has stood shoulder-to-shoulder with us in this effort – filing an amicus brief arguing that Section 5 must be upheld, and working hard to safeguard the rights of language minorities. And it's why – no matter the outcome of this important case – my colleagues and I will remain committed to the aggressive and appropriate enforcement of every federal voting and civil rights protection that's on the books.

What we cannot – and will not – do is stand by and allow the slow unraveling of an electoral system that so many have sacrificed so much to construct. We must not countenance procedural abuses or consider unwise proposed changes – such as shortened voting periods – that are inconsistent with the historic ideal of expanded participation in the process. We must take action, together, to address long lines – which are unnecessary and may depress turnout among certain voting populations. And we must speak out against recent proposed changes in how electoral votes are apportioned in specific states – and call such proposals what they are: blatantly partisan, unfair, divisive, and not worthy of our nation.

Above all, we must stand together to honor the basic principles of equal treatment and fair representation that have always been at the center of our identity as a nation; that have driven MALDEF to fight for expanded access and social change in the public arena; and that have stood at the core of the Justice Department's recent efforts to enforce voting laws and a range of other essential civil rights protections.

Especially over the past four years – under the leadership of Assistant Attorney General and Secretary of Labor-designate Tom Perez – the Department's Civil Rights Division has taken this work to new heights – striving to reduce violence, eliminate bias, and combat intimidation. We've significantly increased hate crime prosecutions. And we have opened a record number of inquiries into local police departments and other agencies to ensure constitutional policing practices.

In addition, we have taken steps to address discrimination in schools – and to protect the right of all children to enroll, regardless of immigration status. Through our Office on Violence Against Women, we're implementing legislative improvements like the reauthorized Violence Against Women Act – which MALDEF helped to secure, and which includes increased protections for immigrants, LGBT men and women, and women in tribal communities. And we're building reinvigorated partnerships with key international authorities – particularly Mexican leaders – to combat the repugnant practice of human trafficking.

Over the past four years, these efforts have enabled the Department to charge a record number of human trafficking cases. Just yesterday, I traveled to Mexico City – and met with my Mexican counterparts – to discuss the Administration's plans to build on this work, and to address other shared law enforcement and criminal justice challenges. I was proud to help strengthen the bonds of friendship that the United States has forged with Mexico and other allies throughout Latin America – and to reaffirm my personal and professional commitment to the values that our people have always shared.

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Yet I recognize that – although we can be encouraged by these recent steps forward, and by the remarkable progress we've seen in the years since MALDEF was founded – there's also no denying that significant obstacles remain before us. Among these challenges, none is more important – or more urgent – than the need to enact commonsense, comprehensive legislation that reforms, improves, and makes more fair our nation's broken immigration system.

As it stands, too many employers game this system by hiring and exploiting undocumented workers. Far too many people are relegated to living in the shadows – without the rights, dignity, and legal protections they deserve. And the escalating costs of this broken system – in terms both economic and moral – are simply too much to bear.

As President Obama has made clear, it is long past time to reform our immigration system in a way that is fair; that guarantees that all are playing by the same rules; and that requires responsibility from everyone – both the people who are here in an undocumented status and those who hire them. Creating a pathway to earned citizenship for the 11 million unauthorized immigrants in this country is essential. The way we treat our friends and neighbors who are undocumented – by creating a mechanism for them to earn citizenship and move out of the shadows – transcends the issue of immigration status. This is a matter of civil and human rights. It is about who we are as a nation. And it goes to the core of our treasured American principle of equal opportunity.

Like many of you, I have been encouraged to see that the bipartisan reforms currently under discussion in the U.S. Senate are consistent with these basic principles. I look forward to working with Members of Congress and groups like MALDEF to help refine and improve these proposals. The Senate Judiciary Committee's markup of legislation next month will provide us all with an opportunity to do this. And, as this debate unfolds, I am optimistic that – if we continue to work together – we can move forward to make our nation stronger, more secure, and more prosperous by building a fair and effective system that lives up to our heritage as a nation of laws – and, never let us forget, a nation built by immigrants. After so many years of work by MALDEF and many others, today, our shared goal of meaningful reform is a real possibility. Just as in the past you have opened the doors of educational opportunity and protected the rights of Latinos at the ballot box – so, today, can we stand together in achieving commonsense, comprehensive immigration reform, and honoring the American story in its most basic form.

For centuries, courageous women and men from every corner of the globe have set their sights on our shores, driven by little more than their hope for a better life and their dream for a brighter future for their children. Many have crossed vast oceans, harsh deserts, and great cultural divides to make that dream a reality.

This is the dream that, many years ago, inspired my own family to come to this country – just as it has inspired so many of yours. Although I am a native New Yorker – by birth as well as upbringing – I'm proud to say I was raised in a home infused with traditions and values that my father and all my grandparents brought with them from the great island of Barbados. I was fortunate to spend many of my formative years in a neighborhood that was populated largely by immigrants – among wonderful, hardworking people who championed education, understood the importance of family, and constantly reinforced the value of tolerance and respect.

These principles are reflected in this Justice Department's efforts to enforce protections against racial and ethnic discrimination – as well as existing immigration laws. They will continue to guide our work to fairly adjudicate immigration cases, and to hold accountable employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers or engage in illegal or discriminatory practices. And they drove the Administration, just last summer, to announce that certain young people – brought to this country illegally by their parents through no fault of their own, but who pose no risk to public safety or national security and who enrich our nation – may now receive relief from removal and apply for work authorization through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals process. Thanks to MALDEF and many others in the legal community, many young people were given the basic information and the legal assistance they needed to come forward and request relief under this process. Their dream must be ours as well.

This common-sense approach to focusing our enforcement resources will help to make our immigration policy not only more efficient and cost-effective – but more just. It represents a step in the right direction – but it's far from a permanent solution. And, by itself, it will never be enough. The time for comprehensive immigration reform is now.

So, as we gather this evening – to celebrate the positive steps we've taken, and to discuss the challenges ahead – we must also seize this chance to reaffirm our collective resolve to build on the record of achievement we've established. Although we come together, as your founders did, in an hour of need – it's also a time of significant opportunity, and limitless promise.

Thanks to the work of committed leaders and passionate advocates in this room – and our partners throughout the Obama Administration and across the country, and patriots and friends like Ken Salazar – I am confident that the months ahead will be marked by deeper engagement between government leaders, policymakers, and advocates from across the political spectrum. I am eager to see where each of you will help to lead us from here. And I am optimistic about the dialogue we will build – and the country and future we will create – together.

Thank you.