

to discuss the vital importance of this rule to our respective organizations.

Sincerely,

Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers; American Lung Association; Association of International Automobile Manufacturers; Association of Local Air Pollution Control Officials; California Trucking Association; Clean Air Network; International Truck and Engine Corporation; Manufacturers of Emission Controls Association; Natural Resources Defense Council; Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management; Sierra Club; State and Territorial Air Pollution Program Administrators; U.S. Public Interest Research Group; and Union of Concerned Scientists.

RESTORING THE MINIMUM WAGE

Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President, today I rise to voice my support of Senator KENNEDY's effort to restore the minimum wage. The Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2001 would raise the minimum wage by \$1.50 in three incremental steps, benefitting over 11 million workers. We owe a pay raise to the hard-working Americans who would be affected by a minimum wage increase. To do so would demonstrate the real value of their hard work.

Care givers in our preschools and nursing homes, service workers in our retail and restaurant industries, the domestic workers in our homes and offices—these are the real people upon whom each of us relies every day. These are the workers who deserve to have their wages restored to a level that will afford them a reasonable standard of living.

In West Virginia alone, over one-fifth of our workers will directly benefit from a \$1.50 increase in the minimum hourly wage. This would mean an increase of almost \$3,000 a year for full-time workers. In more concrete terms, this translates into more than a year of groceries, rent for seven months, seventeen months of utility bills, or a year of tuition at a two-year college. Currently, a full-time minimum wage earner with two children may be faced with difficult decisions when trying to both feed and clothe her children. We need to make sure that a mother or father who works forty hours a week does not have to decide between groceries for the family and paying the electric bill.

Ultimately, we must acknowledge that the minimum wage standard has been allowed to slowly erode over the past thirty years. At present, the \$5.15 hourly minimum has reached its lowest purchasing power in two decades, which has aggravated problems for the working poor. Today, the real value of the minimum wage is \$2.90 below what it was in 1968. As our country continues to make unprecedented economic gains, this is simply unacceptable. We have an obligation to the working families in West Virginia, and across the Nation, to raise the minimum wage to a level that will lift them out of the day-to-day struggle of meeting their most basic needs.

I believe that raising the minimum wage over the next two years is essential to help families and to reinforce the fundamental American values of hard work and self-sufficiency. The goal of the country's minimum wage is to ensure that working Americans earn a living wage that makes work a truly better choice than welfare or other public assistance. The fact that 70 percent of workers earning minimum wage are adults over the age of twenty, that 60 percent are women, and that nearly half have full-time jobs means that this is an issue central to millions of hard-working families in our country. In West Virginia alone, almost 14 percent of our work force earn at the minimum wage, and our state has one of the largest populations of workers receiving the minimum wage. I am proud to join Senator KENNEDY and my colleagues to work together to enact this essential bill for working Americans.

HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTING

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, last Friday, at least one gunshot was fired at Detroit's Osborn High School. The gunshot hit a classroom window and two students and a teacher were injured as glass shattered across the room. Although the shooting produced no substantial physical injuries, it created great anxiety for the students and families of Osborn High School, who no doubt will sustain the emotional injuries of such a shooting for some time.

The students and teachers at Osborn High School are not alone in their anxiety. Around the nation, students and their families are seriously concerned about safety in their schools. Students deserve to feel safe in their learning environments rather than feeling anxious and fearful. For the students at Osborn High School and everywhere else in America, Congress must work to limit the accessibility that young people have to guns, and reduce the gun violence in our schools and community places.

THE SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS TAX RELIEF ACT 2001

Mr. HUTCHINSON. Mr. President, last week I introduced legislation which I hope is the first of several steps taken by Congress to correct a terrible injustice currently imposed on seniors who have worked hard all of their lives and are receiving Social Security benefits.

Many people do not realize that, after they have paid Social Security taxes throughout their work careers, up to 50 percent or 85 percent of the monthly benefit they receive from Social Security may be taxed again.

Prior to 1993, up to 50 percent of Social Security benefits were taxable for individuals with incomes above \$25,000, and couples with incomes above \$32,000. In 1993, after President Clinton raised the portion of Social Security benefits which are taxable up to 85 percent for

individuals with incomes over \$34,000, and couples with income over \$44,000.

President Clinton's 1993 tax increase on senior citizens made a bad policy even worse. Essentially, this graduated tax scheme penalizes seniors with fixed incomes who have worked hard to ensure their retirement security.

S. 237, the Social Security Benefits Tax Relief Act, which I have introduced along with my colleagues, Senators COCHRAN, FRIST, INHOFE, LOTT, MURKOWSKI and WARNER, would repeal the 1993 Clinton tax increase on Social Security benefits and rolls the tax levels back to their pre-1993 levels.

By eliminating the taxation of Social Security benefits, we will allow seniors to have more money to pay for prescription drugs, medical care, housing and food. This legislation provides greater tax fairness for increasing numbers of middle-income seniors.

It is widely agreed that Social Security was never intended to be the sole source of income for retirees. In light of Social Security's financial troubles, now is the time to remove disincentives for those who wish to save and plan early for their retirement. Hopefully, this legislation is a first step toward the repeal of all taxes on Social Security benefits.

I urge my colleagues in the Senate to provide tax relief to seniors by passing this important legislation and by examining ways to make the system as fair as possible for all beneficiaries who have paid into the system and who may or may not be subject to taxes on their benefits.

LITHUANIAN INDEPENDENCE

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, on Sunday, February 11, 2001, Americans of Lithuanian descent will be gathering, in my home State of Michigan, to celebrate the 83rd anniversary of Lithuanian Independence.

Given the Lithuanian people's long history of successfully preserving and maintaining their culture and identity, there is reason for all those of Lithuanian descent to be proud. Such an achievement stands as an inspiration for people everywhere.

The Lithuanian people have long refused to be placed under the yoke of oppression. They became independent in 1918, fought the Nazis during the Second World War and refused to lose hope during many years of Soviet rule. Reflecting on these trials can be cause for great sadness but also much hope.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Lithuania has experienced nearly eleven years of democracy and free markets. The Lithuanian people are to be commended for the significant steps they taken to ensure Lithuania's place in the free world. In 1999, I had the opportunity to meet with President Valdas Adamkus, and discuss many issues facing both our nations. Many of my colleagues may not know this, but so great is President Adamkus' love for

his ancestral homeland that he returned to Lithuania to run for President after a successful career in the United States, including service as an official in the States Environmental Protection Agency.

In its efforts to reform, Lithuania has placed a premium on joining the European Union, EU, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. Sound monetary policy and a stable currency have given Lithuania the framework for economic growth and prosperity. On the security front, Lithuania was the first member of the former Soviet Union to participate in the Partnership for Peace. The Partnership for Peace is an important program where the United States and its NATO allies work with former Warsaw Pact nations on common security measures.

At this time when we honor Lithuania's independence, it is only fitting that we laud the extraordinary advances made by the Lithuanian people. I know my Senate colleagues join me in saluting the Lithuanian people for their tremendous courage in promoting participatory democracy and free markets.

THE SMALL BUSINESS TAX RELIEF ACT OF 2001

Mr. HUTCHINSON. Mr. President, as Congress considers President Bush's comprehensive tax relief plan in the coming weeks, I sincerely hope that we will examine ways to make the tax system more equitable to small business.

As we look at the economic indicators, it is clear that the economy could use a boost. One way we can do this is to encourage the further growth and success of small businesses, which for decades have been the cornerstone of our growing economy.

A proposal I would like my colleagues to seriously consider is the Small Business Tax Relief Act of 2001, which I introduced last week.

Small businesses owners generally have restricted cash flow, as well as limited access to credit. Funds are not readily available to invest in new equipment that may be needed to operate the business effectively.

Small businesses need to be allowed to expense a significant portion if not all of the costs for new equipment purchases in the year the purchase was made, rather than depreciating it over many years, which frees up necessary capital to make necessary investments and improvements.

Specifically, the Small Business Tax Fairness Act provides small businesses relief from an outdated rule that currently only allows a business to expense \$24,000 per year for new or used equipment. S. 236 proposes two key changes to the equipment expensing rule that will ease the cost on small businesses when necessary updates are needed in their facilities:

The bill increases the current \$24,000 allowable equipment expensing amount to \$100,000; and

It increases the cap beyond which limits the equipment expense deduction from \$200,000 to \$400,000.

Another important provision of this legislation directly impacts small businesses which are restaurants or franchises. Because restaurants find themselves at a competitive disadvantage with other businesses, such as convenience stores, which are allowed a 15-year depreciable life, the Small Business Tax Fairness Act would allow restaurants to depreciate the cost of their original building, and any subsequent renovations or improvements to the building, at a same rate of 15 years, instead of the current depreciation schedule of 39 years.

Unlike other commercial buildings, restaurant buildings are specialized, single-purpose structures that are rarely converted to non-restaurant use. Restaurants also experience considerably more traffic, and remain open longer than most retail buildings. This daily assault causes rapid deterioration of restaurant properties, and forces restaurateurs to constantly repair and upgrade their buildings.

Because restaurant facilities do have a much shorter life span than other commercial establishments, this bill would alleviate the punitive depreciation schedule for restaurants that currently exists.

Similarly, most franchise contracts cover a span of 15 or 20 years. By reducing the depreciation period from 39 to 15 years for franchise and restaurant properties, this legislation more accurately reflects the true economic life of the properties.

S. 236 is supported by the International Franchise Association, the National Federation of Independent Business, the National Association of Women Business Owners, and the National Restaurant Association. I urge my colleagues to support this important legislation.

INTERNET NON-DISCRIMINATION AND SALES TAX SIMPLIFICATION ACT

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I rise today to add my support to promoting electronic commerce and keeping it free from discriminatory and multiple state and local taxes. I am pleased to join the senior senator from Oregon as an original cosponsor of the Internet Non-Discrimination and Sales Tax Simplification Act. I commend Senator WYDEN for his continued leadership on Internet tax policy.

The Internet has changed the way we do business. Today, businesses can sell their goods and services all over the world in the blink of an eye. E-commerce has created new markets, new efficiencies and new products. In fact, retail revenues from electronic commerce grew from \$13 billion in 1999 to \$26 billion in 2000. Retail sales are expected to continue to grow on the Internet to \$178 billion in 2005.

The growth of electronic commerce is everywhere, including my home

state of Vermont. Today, hundreds of Vermont businesses are doing business on the Internet, ranging from the Vermont Teddy Bear Company to Al's Snowmobile Parts Warehouse to Ben & Jerry's Homemade Ice Cream.

Let me just give you a few examples of Cyberselling in Vermont:

The New York Times recently profiled Buch Spieler, a Montpelier music store, as a shining example of the power of the Internet to boast sales and change the way many local stores do business. According to Fred Wilber, who has been running Buch Spieler for the past 27 years, overall sales has jumped by 10 percent and its customer base has expanded by 20 percent in the 18 months since he took his business online.

Gardeners Supply Company of Burlington opened its web site five years ago to accompany its catalog of environmentally-sound products. With an average annual growth rate of about 150 percent, Gardeners now sells more than \$10 million worth on products online.

Pompanoosuc Mills, a furniture company in Thetford, has been online for about two years. In its first year, the company made about \$1,300 a week from Internet-related sales. By its second year, online sales had tripled to \$4,000 a week.

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, based in Waterbury, went on the web to gain more direct access to consumers since its coffee business was about 95 percent wholesale. Today, Green Mountain has doubled its retail sales through the Internet.

And Burr Morse, President of Morse Farm Sugar Works, outside Montpelier, sold so much maple syrup online that he testified before the Senate Commerce Committee on the benefits of e-commerce for small businesses nationwide.

For the past five years I have learned first-hand about this e-commerce explosion by hosting annual workshops on Internet sales. At my Doing Business On The Internet Workshops in Vermont, small business owners recounted tales of successful selling on the Web and share their tips for future success with fellow entrepreneurs. For instance, Megan Smith of The Vermont Inn in Killington attended one of the workshops and now takes reservations over the Net from customers all across the country and around the world. And Maura Malone attended our workshops for the past three years in a row to learn how to reach more customers for her fabric/quilt store, Back Country Threads, which is deep in the woods in Essex. She created her own website and won the "Top Customer Service Award" from Yahoo Store for the last 10 months running.

These Vermont cybersellers are of all sizes and customer bases, from Main Street merchants to boutique entrepreneurs to a couple of famous ex-hippies who sell great ice cream. But what Vermont online sellers do have in common is that Internet commerce allows