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A Senator on the Stump With a Frank Message: Give Me More Stature



*Paul Strauss at an election debate this month in Washington.
He is one of two "shadow" senators from the District of Columbia.
Credit...Gabriella Demczuk/The New York Times*

By Emmarie Huetteman, *The New York Times*, March 21, 2014

WASHINGTON — The red-and-white campaign signs are on lampposts across the capital, urging voters to re-elect **Paul Strauss** as the United States senator from the District of Columbia.

The only problem is, there is no officially recognized United States senator from the District of Columbia.

For 17 years, Mr. Strauss has served as one of the city's two "shadow" senators, elected positions that are part of a delegation that advocates statehood for the District's 646,000 residents. It is one of the more quixotic jobs in politics, most often described by noting what it lacks: no vote in Congress, no access to the Senate floor, no office on Capitol Hill and no salary — though Mr. Strauss gives himself \$10 a year to avoid being labeled "unpaid," an adjective he sees as trivializing.

Now Mr. Strauss, a Democrat and a lawyer, is campaigning for an April 1 primary, and is likely to win against a challenger he has defeated before. As he hustles around the city explaining housing law to his clients in a basement laundry room and eating cheese pizza with statehood advocates, he is especially sensitive to any insinuation that there is something inauthentic about him and the District's other shadow senator, **Michael D. Brown**, also a Democrat. A single shadow representative, **Nate Bennett-Fleming**, another Democrat, rounds out the delegation.

"We're not pretend senators," Mr. Strauss said in a recent interview. **"We're not impostors. We're duly elected officials representing a people who are as entitled to full rights as any other citizen of this republic."**

The bearded and burly Mr. Strauss, 49, does at times look the part. On a recent afternoon, he met a congressional staff member for a late lunch in the Senate dining room, where Mr. Strauss has privileges, then left his car adorned with Senate plates in a no-parking zone in front of a hotel. Next, he hurried into a Democratic National Committee meeting and expertly maneuvered toward his target, Senator **Sherrod Brown**, Democrat of Ohio, to talk to him about a long-stalled bill for D.C. statehood.

Mr. Strauss put a hand on Mr. Brown's back to get the senator's attention and managed to snag a few seconds of his time before Mr. Brown rushed to the door. **"He has a plane to catch,"** Mr. Strauss said, playing down the brushoff.

Sitting in his modest, rent-free office in the basement of the District of Columbia's government building with three interns engrossed nearby in their laptops, Mr. Strauss preferred to focus on the fruits of his labor: a budding, star-studded public information campaign and a promise from Senator **Thomas R. Carper**, Democrat of Delaware and chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, to try to hold a hearing on a pending statehood bill this year.

"You don't just re-enlist for your fourth tour lightly," he said.

The shadow delegation is not a new concept. Tennessee and Alaska approved constitutions before they were admitted to the Union, and District voters did the same for the proposed state of New Columbia in 1982. By 1990, voters had elected the first shadow delegates, among them the Rev. **Jesse L. Jackson Sr.**

“The greatest frustration for residents of the District of Columbia is how to get the message to the American people that we do not have the same rights as they have,” said **Eleanor Holmes Norton**, the District’s nonvoting delegate in the House, who is not part of the shadow delegation.



Mr. Strauss says he won more votes in his last election than Mark Begich, a senator from Alaska. Credit...Gabriella Demczuk/The New York Times

The latest strategy of Mr. Strauss and the others is [a public information campaign called 51 Stars](#), in which actors including **Mario Van Peebles** and **Evan Handler** urge Americans to call their senators. Mr. Strauss is hoping that the videos will go viral on the Internet.

With no government funding, the delegation’s modest budget comes mostly from private donations. Mr. Strauss used his Delta frequent flier miles to travel to Los Angeles to promote the 51 Stars campaign. Mr. Brown, 60, who used to run a direct-mail operation, estimates he has spent up to \$50,000 of his own money during his seven years in office.

“They shouldn’t have to go into their pocket to fund this effort,” said **Vincent Orange**, a Washington city councilman who introduced a bill last year that would dedicate more than \$1 million to the effort. Mr. Brown said some members of Congress saw him and his colleagues as little more than volunteers. By his telling, when he told

Senator **Edward M. Kennedy**, his former boss, that he had been elected senator from the District of Columbia, Mr. Kennedy replied, **“Isn’t that fun?”**

“He respected what I did, but he also said, ‘Let’s not forget who’s the real senator in the room,’” Mr. Brown said.

Statehood opponents contend that granting the District statehood would give the city an unfair advantage over more populous states or other cities, a point advocates dispute by pointing out that the city of Washington has more people than Vermont or Wyoming.

Mr. Strauss often brings up that he won more votes in his last election than **Mark Begich**, a first-time senator from Alaska, while his fellow shadow senator, Mr. Brown, received more than **Heidi Heitkamp**, a first-time senator from North Dakota.

“So if you ask Thomas Jefferson if I should be legitimate,” Mr. Brown said, **“his answer would be yes.”**

But considering the tensions on the Hill, Mr. Strauss said: **“I don’t know, if they were to swear me in today, if I would want the job.”**

A Homeland Security Committee aide said that Senator Carper would like to hold a hearing on his bill, which would keep the White House and other federal property under congressional control but would grant statehood to the rest of the city.

Still, Ms. Norton said it was unlikely that Congress would approve a statehood proposal anytime soon.

“Issues happen in our country because they’re ripe,” she said. **“It’s very difficult for any issue to be ripe in this Congress.”**

The delegates say they are preparing for that time.

“I think there’ll be a seminal moment and that we need to be prepared for it,” Mr. Brown said. **“And I like to think that that’s what we’re doing: We’re preparing.”**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/us/the-seat-doesnt-exist-thats-why-the-senator-is-campaigning-so-hard.html?searchResultPosition=31>