



September 20, 2005

Dear Member of Congress:

Common Cause calls on the President and Congress to appoint an independent, nonpartisan commission modeled on the bipartisan 9-11 Commission to investigate government's response to the disaster caused by Hurricane Katrina.

We believe it is critical that the commission be appointed soon. While the foremost priority now must be the recovery of the affected areas and, especially, the dislocated residents, it is important that questions raised about government's response at all levels be addressed soon. Because a natural disaster or a terrorist attack can occur at anytime, now is the time to ensure that government is ready to respond more quickly and effectively than it did following Katrina.

This commission must have a bipartisan membership and include members who are nonpartisan. It should include people with both technical expertise and experience in the bureaucracy of emergency preparedness and response.

The commission should be independent of Congress, the Executive Branch, and of state and local governments. It is not possible for those who led this demonstrably failed response to conduct a credible investigation. As the Hartford Courant editorialized: "A review led by Mr. Bush would lack credibility...Congress and the president must create an independent body composed of members with no current government connections and with impeccable credentials, much like the bipartisan 9-11 Commission that investigated the 2001 terrorist attack in the United States."

We believe the commission should review not only the federal response, but the state and local responses as well. A particular focus should be on intergovernmental cooperation, or lack of it.

The commission should cover the full range of issues that have been raised, including but not limited to communications, legal issues, bureaucratic organization, evacuation and relocation plans, especially for those without easy access to transportation, and medical care.

The commission should pay special attention to the oversight role of Congress and the executive branch in the spending of billions of dollars in federal aid for Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. Many similarities have been drawn between the reconstruction of Iraq and New Orleans and surrounding Gulf Coast area. Given the waste, fraud and abuse that occurred in Iraq due to a lack of independent oversight, it is important for a commission to investigate and recommend ways to ensure that federal funding is spent effectively.

Derek Bok
Chairman

Chellie Pingree
President and CEO

Archibald Cox
Chairman Emeritus

John Gardner
Founding Chairman

While there has been a partisan fight over how the Katrina disaster should be investigated, we believe that the only publicly credible course is establishing an independent commission free of partisan control. Democrats in Congress have been pushing for an independent commission, but thus far the President and other Republicans have rejected the idea. Yet Senator Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) recently noted that an independent commission did a good job investigating the Exxon-Valdez oil spill in Alaska and said, "We can learn a great deal from an independent commission or independent entity." At a recent discussion at the Brookings Institution of the government's response to Katrina, Richard Falkenrath, a Republican and a former Homeland Security official, said that there should be an independent investigation and it should start soon.

The commission should be modeled on the 9-11 Commission, which worked in a nonpartisan manner, carried out a thorough investigation and presented (and advocated for) a set of recommendations. Thomas Kean, a Republican and co-chair of the 9-11 Commission, recently suggested Congress may be too partisan to win public confidence in any legislative probe of the disaster and recommended an independent commission like the panel he oversaw. Kean compared the response to this disaster to the response to 9-11: "This is not a terrorist incident, but it brings into play all of the same issues and shortcomings ... What makes you mad is that it's the same things we saw on 9-11. Whoever is responsible for acting in these places hasn't acted. Are they going to do it now? What else has to happen for people to act?"

Congress must act quickly to create a panel described above to investigate the government's response to Hurricane Katrina to begin restoring the public's confidence in its government.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chellie R." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Chellie Pingree
President