

Remarks by Representative Frank Dermody

I am pleased to convene this meeting of the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Courts. This is the first of several hearings on the subject of judicial reform in Pennsylvania that the subcommittee will be conducting during the next few months.

During this hearing, we will be hearing from a number of distinguished observers of our judicial system, who have generously consented to share their considerable expertise with the subcommittee. On behalf of the subcommittee members, I wish to thank Pennsylvania Common Cause, the Pennsylvania League of Women Voters and Pennsylvanians for Modern Courts for agreeing to appear before us. This afternoon, we will be hearing from two other important sources of knowledge about the judicial system, namely the State Court Administrator and a senior staff attorney with the National Center for State Courts.

There can be little doubt that the need for Judicial reform must be thoroughly evaluated at this time. Over the past decade, numerous proposals designed to bring about reform and improvements to the judicial system have been offered by a variety of sources. Some of these proposals may be accomplished by legislative action. Others may be achieved only through actions taken by the Supreme Court or through Constitutional amendment. All deserve consideration.

In preparation for the subcommittee's efforts this summer and fall, we have examined several studies of the judicial system conducted during the past decade, such as the Pomeroy Committee report and the Beck Commission report. As a result, we have a list of some 30 recommendations, which will be studied by the members of the subcommittee. That list of court reform proposals includes the following major categories: Court Administration, The Role of Advisory Bodies in Court Administration, Financial Accountability, Supreme Court Practice and Procedure and Judicial Selection and Retention. In other words, we are not approaching this effort in a vacuum, but are making ourselves fully aware of all of the valid and significant proposals for court reform that have been offered in recent years. Furthermore, we welcome and invite the new ideas and proposals that, I am certain, will be offered by the speakers today and at subsequent hearings.

We have also examined the various court reform bills that have been introduced in both the House and Senate over the past two legislative sessions. During the 1993-94 session, at least 32 such bills were introduced, and at least 28 bills were introduced during the 1991-92 session. For the most part, these proposed bills fall into the same categories that I cited earlier.

One additional major source of information that will be available to the subcommittee will be relevant court practices and methods in other states, which we might wish to emulate in Pennsylvania. These sources include the National Center for State Courts, which is on our agenda today, as well as the American Judicature Society and the American Bar Association, among others.

I wish to emphasize that this effort by the Subcommittee on Courts will result in more than a report and yet another set of recommendations for future consideration. It is my intent as Chairman of the Subcommittee that the end result will be the introduction of legislation in order to provide the types of improvement that can be accomplished through legislation. I know that I speak for the other subcommittee members when I say that our intent is to fashion a more efficient and accountable court system - one that is better able to administer justice to the citizens of this Commonwealth.