“No Taxation Without Representation!” This phrase was the bedrock of the American Revolution. This slogan expressed the solid belief that government should not tax a populace unless that populace is somehow represented in government. At the time, many in the colonies felt they were not represented in the British Parliament. The slogan summarized one of 27 colonial grievances of the thirteen colonies. We know these grievances eventually lead to the American Revolution. If they weren’t represented, the British had no right to tax them. Britain had the right to tax imports and exports from the colonies. The colonists themselves had no say in how taxes would be applied, what items were taxed, or how those taxes would be used. The colonists used their labor to create the goods but saw no benefits from the revenue those taxes generated. They basically worked for free.

We now know this type of taxation is unacceptable. We know that taxpayers have a right to representation. However, we have a growing part of the population that aren't represented in government. People with felony convictions can lose their right to vote, employment, parental rights, and public and social benefits such as public housing and access to student loans and grants. These rights, in many cases, are not returned even after people have served time. They are punished for the rest of their lives. Many of these felonies are for nonviolent offenses. How can we continue to marginalize whole populations of people after they have paid their debt to society?

Economies that work for working families must have a way for people to redeem themselves to participate fully in society. This is the one of the cornerstone of strengthening local communities across Tennessee. Strong, evidence-based criminal justice reform policy is crucial to that mission. The failed policies of the past drove over-incarceration and the criminalization of addiction, mental health crises, and poverty, ravaging communities – especially black and brown communities. Rural TN has an opioid crisis that is also part of leaving people out of the economy to rebuild on the recovery side of addiction. These people are constantly reminded even after they are released they are taxed but cannot participate in the deomcratic process or have access to tools to rebuild their lives. They are no longer eligible for student loans, employment and can even be denied public housing.

We need equity for people that have served time. No one should pay for mistakes for the rest of their lives. Fundamental changes in our society address disparities with the right investments. We have to include all people in this change to rebuild our communities to be healthy and safe for all working families.

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