

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of this committee.

I am here today to voice my strong opposition to S.4924, a bill that moves New Jersey in the wrong direction.

It's not just me who thinks that way. 3.3 million New Jerseyans voted less than a month ago, and while they may have voted for different candidates, they overwhelmingly expressed the same sentiment.

They want government that is focused on solving real problems that they face. Problems of affordability and care. That is not what they think of our government is doing right now. And they are right.

We live in the time of the greatest amount of distrust in politics in modern American history. 84 percent of New Jerseyans surveyed believe their elected officials are corrupt. They want politics that isn't some exclusive club for the well off and the well connected.

I come here today to urge you to not move forward on this bill.

You know this isn't the right time to push this kind of legislation. Even if you think there are legitimate reforms that can be made, you know this is not how you go about it. Pushing something rapidly during a lame duck session when we have a new governor coming in next month.

Mr. Chairman, after I finish testifying, I will get back on a train and go to Washington for votes at the United States Capitol.

Since January, we have been fighting a corrupt Administration that has distorted the government and used its allies in the House and Senate to weaken oversight and transparency so the Trump family and their political allies can make untold money and seize power without being held accountable.

How can we legitimately criticize the lawlessness and the disregard of transparency and accountability down in DC if we take actions to weaken safeguards here at home?

Trump is firing Inspector Generals, gutting and threatening independent agencies, forcing government employees to pledge fealty to him or be fired. He's appointing his loyalists to jobs they have no qualifications doing.

And then I hear about what this bill before the committee does.

It strips the Comptroller of important authorities, weakening the oversight ecosystem here in New Jersey at a time when we should be working to rebuild and restore trust, not reduce it.

It does so by stripping away key investigative and subpoena powers from the office of the Comptroller.

It weakens the mandate on state investigative entities to meet regularly and coordinate investigations.

There are a number of concerns and others testifying will dive into some in greater detail. I want to raise two in particular.

When seeking to generate accountability, one must create an institution with independence. That independence will give space for the institution to investigate and not be influenced by political and government leaders. I hope we can all agree to that goal.

I think it is wrong to have commissioners of a watchdog agency, with this expanded and consolidated power as this bill would create, appointed in way that makes them susceptible to political influence and pressure.

The commissioners are currently directly appointed by the Governor who would singularly appoint 2 commissioners, the Senate President who would singularly appoint 1, and the Speaker of the Assembly who would singularly appoint 1 without any confirmation from the broader legislature to vet qualifications and their approach to the job. This leaves far too much room for commissioners to be influenced or made for political reasons.

This bill makes this arrangement even worse. Especially when the language of this bill amends the employment of not just the commissioners and executive director, but of all employees to be "At Will" as stated in section 12: "Employees of the commission, including the State Inspector General, shall be hired at will and without regard to civil service."

So they could be fired at any time by political leaders.

They don't have the protections that the State Attorney General has where he needs to be removed by a vote of the legislature. They don't have the protection that the current NJ Comptroller role has where they need to be given "for cause" reasoning for being terminated.

How can any independent agency and its employees be given a sense of independence if they are appointed by single individuals and are "at will" employees? It makes no sense.

If this was the case for our federal government right now, if President Trump, Speaker Johnson, and Leader Thune could singularly appoint inspector general positions, any semblance of oversight would be ever more restricted.

Independence is further challenged by the fact that the Commissioners are part-time positions and that all have outside work in the private sector.

I have respect of the State Commission of Investigations and their work. But this bill's efforts to greatly expand their powers at the expense of the Comptroller is opening the door for serious abuses of power and conflicts of interests.

This will just add to the problems of distrust in politics.

Independence means being able to investigate and act without fear of reprisal, without fear of political and financial impact, and being able and willing to stand up even to the powerful if needed.

You all have the power to restore trust by standing up for transparency and accountability.

I was told too many times, that's just how things work here in Jersey politics. Power is too entrenched; there is no way to fix it.

I refuse to believe that. And we've shown that it doesn't have to be this way. What I have come to see here in New Jersey must be fixed. We demand it.

The people of New Jersey are sick and tired of it. They feel that way because they know this is happening at their expense. Working families are paying for it.

I urge this committee to do the people's work.

To reject this bill and to move onto an agenda that restores trust and puts New Jersey families in the driver's seat.

Thank you, and I look forward to answering any questions members of this committee might have.

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