

The intellectual trap of status ideologies



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

Effective public policies must stem from the economic, social, political or cultural real, vital “problematique” that they are directed to. Ideological considerations must recognize and respect these realities in order to modify them or transform them according to the ideal

that inspires the policies directed toward their improvement. Thinking on these matters must go from the real to the abstract, not the other way around.

Political status thinking in Puerto Rico has historically gone from the abstract to the realities. Our politicians and intellectuals first favor independence or statehood as ideals and then try to apply these molds to our realities.

Former Gov. Luis Muñoz Marín was the first political leader to have the moral courage, intellectual insight and political wisdom to relinquish his “ideal” of independence in favor of a relationship that better provided for the development and well being of the Puerto Rican people structured by our geographical, populational, economic, social, cultural and democratic-political realities, and the political and constitutional realities in the U.S. This is the thinking that brought about commonwealth, the most important political achievement in our history.

From their ivory towers and their subjacent autocratic instincts, the pro-independence leaders and intellectuals scorned commonwealth as possibilism, ignoring that politics—particularly democratic politics—as a tool for human progress is necessarily “the art of the possible.” With self-righteous indignation they committed themselves to the “eternal values” of their ideal. From their magnificent summit they cast their anathemas against us pragmatic mortals when we dare to propose something short of their idealistic conceptions.

Ideological premises based on status preferences are a stumbling block to an objective analysis of our problematique and to effective solutions to our problems. These one are particularly harmful to the development of consensus in establishing policies on matters such as economic recovery or education. When analysis of a particular problem leads to the conclusion that the “colonial” condition is responsible for, and a constraint to solving, whatever problem, objective thinking comes to an end, creativity is cast aside, politics sets in and the solution is deferred to the magical effects of status change.

This type of thinking is pervasive in Puerto Rico. It is the classic platform from which ideas

stemming from our realities and possibilities are understood and criticized. It is a symptom of political underdevelopment.

The most basic political reality in Puerto Rico is that there can be and won’t be a status change within the lifetime of present generations. There can be improvements to commonwealth, but not a change to free association. There can be an effort in Congress to become a state of the union, but not the admission of Puerto Rico as the 51st state. The intellectual trap of status ideologies

The change-of-status
mirage prevents statehood,
independence and free
association advocates from
realizing that in commonwealth
we have the powers and the
means with which to face most
of our problems, and that as to
most matters in which we don’t,
Congress can be brought around
to provide them if we don’t
politicize our demands.

prevents us from understanding the reality that the divisions existing in Puerto Rico regarding status preferences don’t permit us to credibly request a status change from Congress. A status change requires a solid and sustainable majority pursuing such a change over a prolonged period of time. This isn’t in the cards for the present generation.

Nonetheless, the change-of-status mirage prevents statehood, independence and free association advocates from realizing that in commonwealth we have the powers and the means with which to face most of our problems, and that as to most matters in which we don’t, Congress can be brought around to provide them if we

don’t politicize our demands. My experiences: stopping, in 1975, U.S. Navy bombing in Culebra; obtaining the Section 936 tax exemption in 1976, and saving it in 1985. The change-of-status people operate in a bipolar, surreal world. On the one hand they seek power in our elections to provide solutions to our problems, and on the other hand they berate the powers available to solve these problems as exhausted powers coming from colonial institutions.

To a government that doesn’t suffer from the “colonial syndrome,” commonwealth provides the power necessary with which to face our problems, understanding that because we are in a federal system, in some areas, such as creating incentives for job creation in federal programs, it is necessary to bring in federal action.

But we are so politicized that when we refer to the powers of the commonwealth, this is elevated to an ideological contention, or a defense of an ideological aspiration. Again we fail to see the reality: We have a government invested by the people of Puerto Rico under our Constitution with the same powers as the governments of the states of the Union, plus the unique power as a commonwealth over all of our taxable resources to the exclusion of the federal government.

Those affected by the colonial syndrome convince themselves that these powers are ineffectual using arguments tainted by this malady, such as that the model of economic development established under commonwealth is exhausted and not functional in the globalized economy. Again they are the victims of their ideological premises. Power is neutral, but it must be used. As time goes by and conditions change, power will respond to creative solutions and new strategies for economic growth. There is nothing lacking in the commonwealth Constitution that stymies creative leadership.

There is a lot of talent in Puerto Rico arrested by ideological shackles. This talent tends to be in politics, in the universities and in the professions. They and all of us are the losers. Their talents lack the normative freedom to cross the threshold of the decolonization response, in order to engage in the realistic analysis of our problems and contribute solutions within the means available to all of us. They need not renounce their aspirations, they just need to come down from their ivory towers and get their feet on the ground. ■

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-76 and 1985-92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-67) and Senate president (1969-72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusiness.pr. Go to [Sign in](#) link on the homepage. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusinesspr.com.