

## The quicksand of status resolution



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

The recent Gaither poll carried by CARIBBEAN BUSINESS asked our voters how important is it to resolve the status problem? How urgent is it? The results: seven out of 10 Puerto Ricans answered that it is important or very important, six out of 10 answered that it is urgent

to resolve the problem. These numbers, says Gaither, have not changed significantly during the last five years.

The answers as to the importance of status resolution seem to contradict the answer given in the same poll to the question of what is Puerto Rico's principal problem today. Only 1%—less than 1 out of 10—say that it is the status issue. Crime, health and the economy take the lead by a margin of 78% over status.

My understanding of these apparently contradictory answers is that on a day-to-day basis the concerns of Puerto Ricans are their day-to-day problems such as insecurity due to the high rate of homicides in Puerto Rico, or health due to the deficiencies of the present healthcare system, or the economy due to the recession. Status is not a day-to-day problem for them. They do not start out the day fearing or feeling oppression from the chains of colonialism as the ideological status junkies would have us believe.

But the people do believe that there is a status problem which needs to be resolved. This problem is not a problem with the functionality of commonwealth. The status problem stems from the ongoing conflict between the varied aspirations of the Puerto Rican people as to the ultimate political destiny of the island. It is the clash between these aspirations that creates a governing problem in Puerto Rico.

Our voters in the general elections held every four years are basically aligned on the basis of their status preferences rather than on the liberal-conservative spectrum on which the voters of mature democracies are aligned. The fault lines dividing our parties are of such a nature that they seriously impede the formation of concerted policies on economic development, education, cultural affairs, international sports, etc. So, as



governments come and go, so do policies which must be maintained for more than one term or two in order to bear fruit.

It comes as no surprise, given this ongoing conflict that has persisted over a century, that the majority of the people of Puerto Rico should think that it is important, even urgent that this problem should be resolved. But, when you ask how it should be resolved, each Puerto Rican would like it to be resolved according to his or her own preference.

Now this would not present an untractable problem if the decision could be taken through a vote by the Puerto Rican people. At one point in time—1966—I was naive enough to believe that given such a vote, the will of the people so expressed would bear fruit in Congress. So I supported the proposal to hold the first plebiscite in the history of our relationship with the United States and campaigned for commonwealth with enhanced autonomy, which won with 60% of the votes.

The plebiscite was held under the recommendation of a Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico with appointees of the highest level from the president of the United States and the governor of Puerto Rico. The Democratic chairmen of the respective Senate and House committees of Congress with jurisdiction over the status of

Puerto Rico were members of the commission and so were the ranking Republican committee members. Since this commission was created by the law of Congress, the plebiscite it recommended is the closest we have had in Puerto Rico to a congressionally sponsored plebiscite to resolve the status problem.

The commission provided that in accordance with the plebiscite results an ad hoc committee should be created, integrated with appointees by the president of the United States and the governor of Puerto Rico, to draw up a proposal for Congress and the president to implement the will of the people of Puerto Rico as expressed in the plebiscite. Again the congressional chairs and ranking minority members were members of this committee.

The committee drew up a new compact of permanent union for the autonomic enhancement of commonwealth which was to replace the present Federal Relations Act. The enhancements came by the way of power over minimum wages, broader powers over the environment, some aspects of immigration and certain functional mechanisms such as a resident commissioner in Congress. The autonomic nature of commonwealth was affirmed and so was permanent union based on American citizenship.

The story of why the new compact proposed by the commission died in Congress is a story I will review in my next column. It is worth reviewing given the efforts of the New Progressive Party to push a nonbinding status bill—now before the U.S. Senate—through Congress and their intent to hold a plebiscite next year on status if they do not get their bill approved by Congress. It is worth reviewing to understand why such actions to garner a plebiscite vote on status are an exercise in futility.

Status resolution devolves through a fatal political quicksand that requires more than a one-shot deal plebiscite expression to bring the matter to fruition. The results have to go through Congress where the losing parties in the plebiscite will mount an all-out campaign—to them a matter of political life or death—to defeat the will of the people. Not nice, undemocratic, but real. In order to get over this hurdle, a sustained political will over a period of time of at least two terms of government is necessary. How to elicit such a will and sustain it in order to prevail is the question. ■

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