

Commonwealth option vindicated in H.R. 2499



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

A travesty upon the most fundamental of all rights—the right to vote—has been avoided by the U. S. House of Representatives. After the repeated defeats of statehood in local referenda, the statehood leadership took it upon itself to discredit commonwealth as a legitimate status option for Puerto Rico's self-determination. Blithely ignoring U.S. Supreme Court precedents, they went to Congress with the specious argument that commonwealth was a colonial relationship; unfit to be on a ballot with statehood or independence.

Gone were the days when statehood party founder Luis Ferré and other Puerto Rican leaders joined the representatives of the U.S. president, Senate and House to proclaim that commonwealth was a status with equal dignity to statehood and independence. These men and women belonged to the U.S.-Puerto Rico Status Commission, created by law in Congress, which recommended the first plebiscite ever held on the future status of Puerto Rico. It included commonwealth, statehood and independence.

The statehood leaders forget that their party



was born out of this plebiscite, which respected the right to vote of all Puerto Ricans. They only remember that commonwealth defeated statehood and independence, garnering 60% of the votes. During the Ford administration, they set out, undemocratically but successfully, to undermine the implementation of the mandate in that plebiscite for the enhancement of commonwealth. Having lost the two ensuing plebiscites that they promoted, they came to the conclusion that the solution to their lack of votes was to eliminate commonwealth from the ballot.

The House of Representatives balked at this affront to democracy. A wide majority voted to amend H.R. 2499 to include commonwealth as

one of the four options in the second round of the process for self-determination. The wheel has come full circle. We are back to the equal dignity categorization that the U.S.-Puerto Rico Status Commission gave commonwealth 44 years ago when we were young and thought that our generation was the one that would finally resolve the centenary status question.



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But, given the underdeveloped level in which this debate evolves in Puerto Rico, a level where no progress is made in a debate because no issues are ever held to be adjudicated, we can be sure that we shall soon say, "here we go again." The statehood leadership and the embittered *independentistas* who blast away over the airwaves will continue to say that the relationship is colonial and unworthy of competing against statehood or independence, even if the people want it.

H.R. 2499 has been approved by the U.S. House and was sent to the upper chamber, where the Senate Energy & Natural Resources Committee has set a hearing for May 19. This hearing should be most helpful in order to perfect this bill. Since the amendment to include commonwealth was included in the floor of the House in the midst of a heated debate, the bill passed the House with two plebiscites.

The self-determination process is still structured on the basis of a first plebiscite to see if Puerto Rico wants commonwealth or a change of status. If voters say they want a change of status, which will be the case because the statehooders and the independence voters will join forces, a second plebiscite would be held. In the second plebiscite

we would choose the permanent status we want. Having included commonwealth in the permanent status options on the second plebiscite, the first plebiscite makes no sense.

Having a first plebiscite is wasteful. It costs a lot of money—over \$2 million—to our government that has had to dismiss thousands of public servants due to a structural deficit in our budget. It is also redundant and unnecessary.

The first plebiscite was conceived when commonwealth was not to appear on the ballot in the second plebiscite because the statehood leadership deemed it colonial. The House vote including commonwealth in the second plebiscite vindicated commonwealth under the premise of equal dignity: the premise established by the U.S.-Puerto Rico Status Commission, which undertook by congressional mandate the most exhaustive study (1964-1966) of the status question for Puerto Rico.

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A second amendment to the House bill is in order. The statehood leadership has sold H.R. 2499 to Congress on the basis that the plebiscites are nonbinding. But, they control the governorship and the Legislature in Puerto Rico. They have legislation in process in Puerto Rico to elect, in the event of a statehood victory in the second plebiscite, two would-be senators and six would-be representatives, who would come knocking at the doors of the next Congress for the admission of Puerto Rico as a state of the union.

Fairness demands that commonwealth supporters must have an equal opportunity through a process mandated by Congress

so that they can seek in an official way before Congress the amendments to the commonwealth compact necessary to make the commonwealth relationship a more perfect union between Puerto Rico and the United States. ■



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