



Club de Roma • Capítulo Puertorriqueño

**WELCOME ADDRESS TO THE 1996 ANNUAL CONFERENCE
OF THE CLUB OF ROME
BY
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PUERTO RICAN CHAPTER**

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PONCE HILTON**

We gather here today to take stock of fundamental concerns regarding the world's predicament at the end of the second milenium after the coming of Christ. You have come from all parts of the world to this Caribbean city of Ponce to identify the signs of hope and priority issues in the advancement of humankind towards its encounter with the limits of our natural endowment. May God help us in our endeavours.

As President of the Puerto Rican Chapter I welcome you to Ponce and to Puerto Rico on behalf of all the members of the Chapter, and on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico who are deeply satisfied that you have chosen our country to discuss these matters at your Annual Conference of 1996. On their behalf I would also like to state our pleasure with the presence of His Highness, the Prince of Asturias, in our country and at this meeting.

Prince Felipe, you bear a particular relationship to our people for having bestowed upon us the prize that bears your name for our defense of the Spanish language. In the few days that you have spent on this island, I am sure that you will have confirmed the wisdom in bestowing this award. For you will have perceived that, beyond current official bilingualism, Spanish remains the language of the Puerto Rican people and the most clear expression of our hispanic heritage. We are proud of that heritage, and determined to preserve it as an essential part of our Puerto Rican identity.

Within our island and in the Caribbean region the world problematique which will be discussed by members of the Club in the next three days has its particular expression and there are, of course, our own responses to the challenges posed which you will find interesting or perhaps a matter of concern.

The deforestation of Haiti and Cuba will certainly be matters of concern. The racial and ethnic integration of the Taino, African, French, English and Spanish peoples and cultures of the islands of the Caribbean -- within the lesser and greater antilles-- is certainly a sign of hope in our world where xnophobia has become a serious matter of concern.

In Puerto Rico you will find both matters of substantial interest and profound concern. We are the most developed island country in the Caribbean with a GDP per capita of around \$11,000. We are also one of the most overpopulated countries in the world. 3.7 million in 8,897 sq. kms. We are one of the few islands in the region that has chosen not to become independent from its metropolitan relation. Instead, we have an autonomous relationship called Commonwealth within the U. S. system.

While I share the same concerns of members of this Club as to the shortcomings of the indicators of traditional economics as adecquate measures of a country's wellbeing, Puerto Rico's per capita GDP, much higher than the rest of Latin America is a fairly good indicator, nonetheless, of the soundness of certain basic political decisions made by our people in the early 50's and which have proven to be grounded on values prevailing at turn of the century.

At that time we were faced with the problem of underdevelopment. It was also a time when ideology was rampant all over the world. We made the decision that our first priority was to develop the full potential of Puerto Ricans and to adapt to that end all political economic, social and other policies. On that basis we decided to develop an open economy based on exports on a productive competitive basis, and to avoid ideological nationalism as the criteria for defining our political status.

This is not to say that we did not cherish our Puerto Rican national identity, but that we did not allow ideological nationalism to deny us access to creative economic and political alternatives that would better enhance our human potential, of which our national character is an important but not the only part.

These decisions which underlie most political and economic policies in the world today, were taken by the Puerto Rican people at a time when going this route was swimming upstream. But life goes on, and progress begets new problems and the Puerto Rican experience is no exception. We were tremendously successful in emerging from underdevelopment, raising living standards, increasing life expectancy, expanding education and creating a broad urban middle class, but our society shares many of the problems of the richer countries of the world while we have neither the riches nor the national consensus for governance to deal with these issues. Our social fabric has deteriorated in a serious way --soaring crime in the San Juan area, family desintegration and drug abuse all over the island; problems which stem not from extreme poverty or gross inequality but

rather from the particular ethic that characterizes welfare state societies where high unemployment remains constant and participation in the labor force remains low.

In addition to that, we are still torn by a debate over what the final political status of Puerto Rico should be. The search for the proper governance of the Puerto Rican nation is conducted under the rough and tumble of partisan democratic politics here and in the United States. The commonwealth relationship has provided for a sound cultural and economic accomodation between Puerto Rico and the United States. The goal of becoming a member state of the union which Puerto Rico's present government pursues may put the U. S. to the test of whether the federal union can become plurinational. Not a small matter.

Puerto Rico shares in the problems of the advanced countries of the world and also in their hopes and aspirations and in their potential to rise above their present difficulties. The establishment of the Puerto Rican Chapter of the Club of Rome has given us a unique opportunity for creative reflection on the path to the future.

It has allowed the members of this Chapter to adopt a global perspective in examining issues and situations with the awareness that the increasing interdependence of nations, the emergence of world wide problems and the future needs of all peoples pose predicaments beyond the capacities of individual countries to solve. And that therefore this island nation must tune in to the borderless world of today.

It has allowed us a deeper understanding of the interactions within the tangle of contemporary problems --political, social, economic, technological, environmental, psychological and cultural, and of the need to approach the solution of problems taking into account this multiplicity of fronts in a coherent holistic way.

It has allowed us to see that our wellbeing requires operational strategies in parallel in all these areas which take into account the longer term so that solutions can be adequately implemented, problems averted, and civilizational goals met.

We in the Puerto Rican Chapter see it as our mission to transmit to the people of Puerto Rico this vision which characterizes the thinking of this Institution created in Rome 28 years ago by Aurelio Peccei to seriously study the predicament of humankind and to evolve creative solutions; to face the global challenges in understanding the world we live in today with its possibilities and limitations and in the midst of uncertainty learn how to manage the new world so that we will not be managed by it.

May our deliberations here in Ponce be fruitful in bringing to the fore the positive aspects and opportunities of the present unprecedented situation and to realize the unique creative potential of this historical moment.