

REMARKS BY THE GOVERNOR
OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO
HONORABLE RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON
ON THE CELEBRATION OF THE TWENTIETH
ANNIVERSARY OF LA CASA DE PUERTO RICO,
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

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For twenty years La Casa de Puerto Rico has distinguished itself as a fortress - a center to which those less fortunate members of our community have turn to for protection and help. We, in Puerto Rico share this commitment that seeks the progress of our community and our people. The potential that all Puerto Ricans posses to succeed can best be accomplished by the meaningful help our people get today from organizations such as yours.

Recently, the Census Bureau reported that there are now 20 million Hispanics in the country. Puerto Ricans are the second largest Hispanic group in the nation, and clearly we are the single largest Hispanic group in northeastern U. S. As such, we are an important part of the growing influence of Hispanic economic, cultural and political power in American society.

Yet, we have monumental challenges ahead of us. The Puerto Rican poverty rate, now exceeds the poverty rate of most Hispanic and black groups. In the northeast, as I have indicated, --where Puerto Ricans are the predominate Hispanic

group-- their poverty rate is 39%, compared to 28% of blacks.

Our low educational achievement in the U. S. as a group, limits our potential to break out of the poverty cycle. Nationally, the dropout rate for Puerto Rican youth is 40%. In some cities, the dropout rate is as high as 67%.

This situation cannot and will not continue! We must take active and decisive steps now! The issues involved are many, some are highly complicated, others require special technical knowledge. But, there is one thing that all Puerto Ricans can participate in, and form part of, which will help to bring about the changes required.

All Puerto Ricans can register and vote. Puerto Ricans as a group can thus make their presence known and their strength felt. Puerto Ricans --perhaps better than most other groups-- know the meaning of the vote. It was through the strength of the vote of the great majority of Puerto Rican voters, that Puerto Rico itself was transformed from an island of extreme poverty to an

island with the highest per capita income in all of Latin America.

The lesson Puerto Rico teaches us is that by improving our participation in both, the local and national political system, we can ensure the necessary gains in education and employment. While 87% of the voters in the island of Puerto Rico regularly participate in elections, statistics show that only about 35% of Puerto Ricans that are eligible to vote in the U.S. are registered.

There has been much speculation on the reasons for such consistently low Puerto Rican political participation. Arguments attempting to explain the factors of low participation rate of the stateside Puerto Ricans include: extremely high poverty rate; intensive circular migration; and erroneous perceptions that Puerto Ricans lack initiative, industry, optimism, and will to succeed.

The tide is beginning to turn. A change in electoral behavior is definitely emerging.

On visits to Puerto Rican communities throughout the northeast, I have been encouraged by

the growing sense of activism and commitment that mainland Puerto Rican leadership has shown in improving the quality of life for our community. Hartford is no different in this regard, indeed, it is on the leading edge of this change.

Hartford's Puerto Rican community has become a pathbreaker for political equality. In only two years, Connecticut has doubled its Puerto Rican elected officials, thanks to grass-roots movements, and intense voter registration campaigns. Here in Hartford, Democratic voters unseated two long-term incumbents and nominated two Puerto Ricans in their place. The victories set the stage for the November election wherein Maria Sanchez and Juan Figueroa became the first Hispanic legislators to represent Hartford in the general assembly.

My administration has not only supported the Puerto Rican community in the U.S., but actually has fought to strengthen it. On August 16, 1989, I signed a bill passed by the Legislature of Puerto Rico, which creates a new cabinet level department. The Department of Puerto Rican

Community Affairs in the U.S., under the leadership of its secretary, Nydia Velazquez, will advocate Puerto Rican's rights for social justice. I created this agency to fight the scourge of prejudice, inequality and discrimination; to resist the typecasting that deprives countless individuals of a fair chance of economic and social advancement.

These efforts will increase the presence and availability of the Government of Puerto Rico as an instrument at the service of every member of the Puerto Rican community in the states. This new department will have a regular, permanent non-partisan, political program, supporting the community movements and respecting the supreme power of the peoples' political will.

Our ATREVETE voter registration campaign in the New York City, has already increased registered voters by 125,000 and the turn out in Puerto Rican/Hispanic areas increased from 31% to 46%. This increase shows that ATREVETE's methods are an effective means of educating and mobilizing the

electorate. I can assure you the same voter registration effort will show similar results, here in Hartford.

The new department will also vigorously promote our culture, fostering creative opportunities for Puerto Ricans and disseminating our rich cultural heritage endowments within and beyond the borders of our community.

We will develop programs to assist young people in their educational goals, to support Puerto Rican professionals, and to provide technical assistance to Puerto Rican businesses.

In order to reach these ambitious goals we hope to work closely and productively with the existing community organizations, by complementing and supporting their programs.

I take this opportunity to thank you, the Puerto Rican community, for the concern and generosity for the Puerto Rican victims of Hurricane Hugo. You are to be commended for promoting a vigorous humanitarian effort that is helping thousands. Your contributions of money,

food, and clothing, your concern and your caring, your prayers for the safety and well-being of your fellow countrymen on the island, demonstrated once more the strong ties and the solidarity that links our two communities: Puerto Ricans living on the mainland and those who live on the island. We learned from Hurricane Hugo. We learned that our Puerto Rican community can work together effectively and harmoniously, and in so doing achieve our greatest goals. En nombre de todos los puertorriqueños en la isla, muchas gracias.

I want to thank Mr. Florencio Morales, for inviting me, to join La Casa de Puerto Rico, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary. Tonight I greet you with pride, with great pride. A pride that comes from knowing of your achievement and of your success.
