

REMARKS BY THE GOVERNOR OF THE
THE COMMONWEALTH OF PUERTO RICO
HON. RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON
ON POLITICAL STATUS
AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

MARCH 14, 1990

BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

I wish to thank the students and faculty of the Harvard Foundation, as well as the Puerto Rican Students' Organization, for inviting me to participate in this discussion on Puerto Rico's political status.

During my Inaugural speech on January 2nd, 1989, I stated that "the vast majority of Puerto Ricans wish to express their view on our political status. The people wish to be consulted."

Since then, other countries which we could not believe would aspire to take the future into their own hands, have also determined to act upon their political status. What we, in Puerto Rico, have in common with such diverse nations as Lithuania, the two Germanies, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, is our strong desire to determine for ourselves and for future generations of Puerto Ricans, what kind of political status will govern us as we prepare to enter the 21st Century.

In Puerto Rico and in the U.S., the three alternative status options being debated are: enhanced Commonwealth status, in permanent union with the United States; Puerto Rican statehood; and Puerto Rican independence.

The 1967 Plebiscite:

In a plebiscite held on July 23rd, 1967, 60 per cent of those voting backed Commonwealth status, while 39 per cent backed statehood and less than one per cent backed independence. Unfortunately, that mandate by the people was not acted upon by the U.S. Congress and the status dilemma has continued to be debated all of these years.

Independence:

Puerto Rico has traditionally shuned outright independence, first from motherland Spain, and after the 1898 Spanish-American War, it has also shuned independence from the United States. This has been proven in election after election, where independence parties have never garnered more than

five per cent of the total vote.

Statehood:

For statehood leaders in Puerto Rico, this status is viewed as a means of perpetuating our political ties with the United States but it is not viewed as the typical statehood which exists in the United States. For example, Puerto Rican statehooders would want a special kind of statehood that includes: continued use of the Spanish language and our Hispanic cultural traditions. . Puerto Rican statehooders would also retain control over foreign immigration, something no other state controls. They would also want to retain our present autonomous Olympic representation, something that no state of the Union enjoys. In other words, Puerto Rican statehooders want statehood with special features that no other state of the Union now has. They speak of a "Jíbaro statehood" which is not contemplated by the U.S. Constitution.

A recent study made publica by the Peat Marwick Economic Political Group shows that, under statehood, 936 corporations and the 300,000 jobs they have created, would not be able to stay in Puerto Rico. Unemployment on the island would rise from the present 14 per cent to more than 40 per cent. We would lose not only between 80,000 and 145,000 jobs in the private sector but also some 90,000 jobs in government. The study also shows that, in order to subsist, Puerto Rico's economy would have to receive anywhere from \$1,600-\$3,700 million for the period of 1992-20000 from the U.S. Government.

Commonwealth:

Commonwealth status, created by act of Congress and by the democratically expressed will of the Puerto Rican people, has allowed Puerto Rico to progress enormously since 1952. In 1950, our per capita income was \$342. In 1989, that per capita income has climbed to nearly \$6,000. Tourism then, was a minor aspect of our economy. Now Puerto Rico

receives more than 3 million tourists yearly which inject some \$1 billion into our economy. In 1952, Puerto Rico was still mainly an agricultural society dependent on three crops: sugar, coffee and tobacco. Today, it is a highly industrialized society with hundreds of pharmaceutical and electronic plants, as well as a highly diversified economy.

Our industrial development program could not exist under statehood. The U.S. Constitution demands that federal taxes throughout the nation must be uniform, thus making our federal tax incentive impossible. Taxes in Puerto Rico are already higher than the combined Federal, state and municipal taxes of most states. Federal taxes on top of our own state taxes would sink our developing economy into stagnation.

While statehood would mean that Puerto Rico would have to pay federal income taxes, thus eliminating our present fiscal autonomy and the jobs created by that autonomy, continued and

enhanced Commonwealth would allow us to maintain the rate of growth we have had during the past several decades.

We are not averse to paying federal income taxes when the time comes for our economy to be able to absorb that tax load. But as long as our per capita income continues to be half of that of Mississippi, the poorest state of the Union, contributing to the federal tax load is not feasible or practical for Puerto Rico. Statehooders view federal income taxes as the just payment for Puerto Ricans' right to vote for the President of the United States and for seven Congressmen, including two senators. But a recent study shows that Mississippi and Louisiana, the two poorest states of the Union, have had congressional representation for the past 170 years and their economies have yet much to be desired. So Congressional representation does not seem to be the economic panacea that Puerto Rican statehooders believe it to be.

In addition to these very solid economic reasons for not being able to afford statehood, there are just as solid cultural reasons for not wanting that status formula. We are traditionally a Spanish speaking people, with almost 500 years of history. We want to continue being Puerto Ricans, with strong Hispanic roots into that 500-year history, and with just as strong U.S. ties, represented by our common citizenship which we treasure and which we have defended since the First World War, right through the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

Puerto Rico cannot develop its fullest potential as a people by following narrow insular perspectives. The future of our people must follow the economic changes that are being brought about by a joint European Economic Community, as well as by the dramatic political changes being forged in Eastern and Western Europe.

Recently, noted U.S. historian and journalist Patrick Buchanan warned, in a Washington Times

article, that giving statehood to Puerto Rico might bring about a guerrilla war similar to the one being fought by the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland. Buchanan asked the following questions: "Are we prepared to send troops, if the people of Puerto Rico should later change their minds? Are we prepared to fight a guerrilla war, like the British in Belfast, if the Macheteros emulate the Irish Republican Army? Before entering a marriage (i.e. statehood) till death do us part, ought not both the island and the mainland reflect longer upon how nasty a divorce would be?"

Buchanan is not inventing this argument of possible violence in Puerto Rico and the United States, because of a status change. When Commonwealth status was enacted, between 1950 and 1952, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party resorted to violence both on the island and on the continental U.S. In 1950, they attacked the Governor's mansion in San Juan, trying to assassinate Gov. Luis Muñoz-Marín. Also in 1950,

they attacked Blair House in Washington, the temporary residence of President Harry S. Truman. Fortunately, both attacks were repelled with no harm done to those intended victims. In 1954, a group of Puerto Rican Nationalists attacked the House of Representatives while in session, seriously wounding several persons including one Congressman, and killing a guard. All these acts of violence were perpetrated in an effort to force independence upon Puerto Rico. What would Puerto Rican nationalists, now known as "Macheteros", be willing to do if statehood were approved? This is something serious enough to oblige us all, in Puerto Rico and in the continental United States, to pause and think about, prior to taking steps toward Puerto Rican statehood.

Statehood has seen a rise in its backers on the island, sometimes due to the unfounded fear that independence and communism are the only alternative. This narrowmindedness fails to take into account the fact of Commonwealth, what it is, what

it can be if it is enhanced by both the Puerto Rican electorate and the U.S. Congress. With Commonwealth providing security and prosperity for all, no threat of communism will take root in Puerto Rico.

What do we mean by enhanced Commonwealth? As we enter a new century and face the challenges of globalized economies in an ever more interdependent world, broader autonomy is necessary so that we may expand the self sustaining character of the Puerto Rican economy. There is a need for a clear federal policy to support the more assertive role of Puerto Rico in the Caribbean area. There is a desire on the part of a majority of Puerto Ricans for a broader framework upon which they can better realize their fullest potential as a people.

In what ways do the bills now being considered by Congress enhance Commonwealth? In four principal ways: by enlarging the political autonomy of the people of Puerto Rico; by accelerating their economic and social development; by providing for

their increased participation in the U.S. government's decisions affecting Puerto Rico; and by safeguarding our distinct cultural and historical heritage.

In the following days, Messrs Carlos Romero-Barceló and Rubén Berríos-Martínez will follow me at this forum and will try to belittle Commonwealth status with the old arguments that only statehood and independence are valid formulas of status for Puerto Rico. I say to you today that a majority of Puerto Ricans created Commonwealth status out of their own experience, out of their own needs and aspirations. Those needs and aspirations require that we continue to be faithful to our Puertoricanism, to our language and culture, but also require that we continue being U.S. citizens, bound to the United States not by laws or by force, but by mutual bonds of self respect, of belief in social justice and of strong dedication to those democratic principles of government we both hold to be sacred.

We, who strongly believe in Commonwealth status, say that Commonwealth today is even more practical and meaningful in this ever-changing world, than it was when it was created in 1952 by that visionary group of Puerto Ricans and North Americans.

Commonwealth has brought political stability to Puerto Rico for more than four decades. On it rests our economic and social progress. Commonwealth has the flexibility to preserve Puerto Rico as a viable and dynamic society. It is a successful and enduring experience in creative statesmanship.

We are now called upon to reinvigorate that relationship; to build a sounder economic Commonwealth and a politically stronger Commonwealth status.

We are now called upon to enhance the strength and the dignity of the people of Puerto Rico, the stability of our Caribbean region, and the democratic values we share with the United States.

Let us once again show the world that we Puerto Ricans believe in the might of the ballot over the might of bullets, in dealing with our social, political and economic problems. For only a people who were able to forge a democratic revolution in the late forties and early fifties by voting instead of fighting, are able to vote again for their continued democratic principles and for their continued and future prosperity.