

Resident Commissioner's Duties Clarified

A Reader's Viewpoint

By NICOLAS QUIÑONES COLL

That the Washington atmosphere is not only far from home but also very different, as Mr. Juan Manuel Ocasio states in his column in the San Juan Star of Monday, August 23rd, should be realized by us all in Puerto Rico. It is most important to bear this in mind not only in order to understand the complexities our resident commissioner has to go through, but also fairly to appraise the reports received concerning his performance. Resident commissioners of necessity must act by themselves in Washington, regardless of what support or assistance they may get from home.

As a matter of fact no proper support or assistance can be intelligently given from home unless home is properly informed and properly guided by the resident commissioner himself. He follows events there from day to day. No matter how familiar with Washington affairs we may be, it is impossible accurately to visualize from here all the intricacies of specific situations there. It would be impossible to map out day to day strategy and tactics at this distance.

This explains in large measure serious discrepancies of the distant past which are now a matter of history. For instance, the discrepancies between Muñoz Rivera, then our resident commissioner and Mr. José De Diego, president of the Unionist Party in Puerto Rico, both great men. When the Jones Act was under consideration, Mr. De Diego would have followed a radical course; Mr. Muñoz Rivera held to

a temperate course. He had found out that in order to succeed in Congress you must know how to compromise. He prevailed and posthumously won for Puerto Rico the Jones Act of 1917.

During the incumbency of Governor Muñoz Marín and of Resident Commissioner Fernós Isern there evidently existed a high degree of coordination between Washington and Puerto Rico. As a result, important chapters of Puerto Rican history were written. The elective governor bill, literally saved at the last minute of the 1947 session (the first session of Congress in which Commissioner Fernós participated) was adopted, followed by the adoption of Public Law 600 in 1952. Law 600 was saved from crippling amendments at crucial sessions of the House and Senate, thanks to able and rapid maneuvering at Committee Meetings, on the floor, at Conference Committees, with timely and coordinated support from Puerto Rico.

These were outstanding examples of the good result on well adjusted team work. A much more recent example is the bill creating the status commission (adopted during the last session Resident Commissioner Fernós served). Even though its consideration started with what many thought were un auspicious beginnings, and even though it required many laborious executive sessions of the Committee of the Interior of the House followed by critical debates on the floor and by Senate amendments, and House amendments to the Senate amend-

ments, it ended up with its approval as we know it. The commissioner acted at all times with San Juan knowledge and support.

However, what information the people of Puerto Rico had while all those developments long past or recent took place, did not always conform with the actual situation. At times there were public alarms and misinterpretations; even dissatisfaction and criticism. It was unavoidable.

Let us not confuse the responsibilities or the functions of the resident commissioner with those of the government of Puerto Rico. The resident commissioner operates within the Federal orbit. The Commonwealth government is a government by itself, even though it has direct relations with the Federal executive in many matters in which the public interest calls for coordinated action. Any amount of executive support from Washington or Puerto Rico, be it ever so diligently or intelligently given, will still re-

quire the persistent, diligent and intelligent work which the Commissioner must perform. He should always receive and welcome all possible properly coordinated outside assistance but he is the man on the spot and he must make decisions and act from day to day as circumstances demand.

With both Messrs. Muñoz Marín and Fernós having retired from

the positions which they respectively held for so many years, the younger men who have succeeded them are equally entitled to our confidence and support. The problems of today are not necessarily those of yesterday; they may well call for different treatment. In any case, we might remember the old Spanish axiom: "Todas las comparaciones son odiosas".