

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COMMONWEALTH  
OF PUERTO RICO IN THE AMERICAN UNION

*Address of Governor Luis Muñoz Marín,  
delivered at the Annual Meeting of the  
Chamber of Commerce of Puerto Rico,  
San Juan, Puerto Rico, February 14, 1958.*

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Puerto Rico's continued progress is known far beyond its shores. Through our cooperation with the United States Department of State, in the Technical Assistance and Educational Exchange programs, Puerto Rico's reputation, and word of its people's work, have reached the farthest countries of Asia, Africa, the Near East, and, naturally, America. We need not here dwell on the signs of our progress; I summarized them a few weeks ago in my message to the Legislature. What I wish to do here is to extend thanks to you for the part you have played, and continue to play, in Puerto Rico's progress. I am honored to express my recognition of your role in the name of all Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Rico is perhaps the country in which private and public initiative are coordinated most spontaneously. Both are based on social responsibility. It is evident that private initiative could not be as effective and as respectable as it is in the democratic world if its only goal were good business for those who practice it. It is equally evident that if public initiative were motivated by the mere desire for salaries and the attainment of positions by officials and employees, its servants would not be spiritually in a condition to give practical and inspiring service. Social motivation justifies both forms of effort in a society.

It is through the guidance of these norms that we have achieved what we have achieved to date. Inspired by them, we continue our steady march toward the future.

In non-doctrinaire Puerto Rico, both forms of initiative live together in the fraternity of one great endeavor. Examples of public initiative are the Water Resources Authority and

parts of our land transportation system. It is entirely possible that our maritime transportation will also come to be included. Examples of private initiative are, among others, the five hundred factories of the economic development program. And those same factories comprise the most significant example of coordination, of public initiative directly stimulating private initiative.

The fact that we are not doctrinaire in our manner of realizing our society's potentialities does not mean that we lack definite, simple, and clear norms for guidance in our development. Among those norms, I would emphasize the following:

The aim of arriving at a good standard of living for all.

Private and public enterprises, as I have said, as expressions of social responsibility.

Economic development as a base for a good civilization rather than as the end purpose of a bad one.

Democracy as the form of government and as a mark of respect for human dignity.

Permanent union with the United States of America. That ought to signify, in the eyes of the Hemisphere and the world, a good understanding of, and good will toward, the great American Union, with which we are associated on terms of equality, with pride, and in an unswerving spirit.

Those, I am convinced, are basic norms which guide the free, creative, and non-doctrinaire spirit of our people. They are norms which lend unity to Puerto Rico's personality and aims, despite the claims for political independence in which a small minority of our compatriots disagrees with the rest of us.

What obstacles can appear in our path? As on the road of all human enterprise, many obstacles can appear. Some we will be unable to avoid: natural disasters — such as hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts — world economic depression, epidemics,



war. Though unable to avoid them, we should be always in readiness to minimize their effects.

There are other possible obstacles that we can avoid. Among them I want to mention those that might be created by our own confusion and those that might arise from confusion in public opinion in the United States, or in the Congress at Washington.

I don't believe there is great danger from our own confusion. We have always in our hands the power to remove the obstacles resulting from it, though there are those among us who believe they are serving some purpose of their own — very much their own — by refusing to understand what is clear, and insisting on not understanding what is simple.

For instance, to correct whatever confusion arises among us over the question of political status, I want to make clear that the words "freedom" and "independence" are not synonymous, since independence is only one of several forms of political freedom. It is perfectly obvious that there are other forms of political freedom which are not called independence. It should be clear to all Puerto Ricans that the word "sovereignty" does not necessarily mean "independence". New York is a sovereign state but not an independent nation. The same is true of California, Texas, and all the other federated states which comprise the American Union. And the human mind, which is politically as well as artistically and scientifically creative, cannot confine itself to one rigid form of statehood in a federation as spiritually vital, as saturated with the very sap of human freedom, as dynamic, as the federation formed by the United States of America.

Note again that when I say that the doors to other forms of political status are open, but that for me they are closed, I make a perfectly plain and simple statement that means precisely what it says: that legally the doors are open for those

who want to pass through them because they don't believe as I do; but that for me and for those who agree with me on political status, they are closed, because of our profound conviction that the present political status is a definite one.

No, my good friends, here in Puerto Rico there should be no confusion on that point, and I believe that with good faith on everyone's part there cannot be serious confusion.

But, how about beyond Puerto Rico? In the States? In the Congress of the United States?

Recently we have seen signs that some people — I am sure they constitute a very small group — are deliberately attempting to create confusion in the minds of members of Congress as distinguished as Senator Murray and Representative Engle, both good friends of Puerto Rico. What is the source of those small beginnings of confusion among those distinguished legislators and fellow citizens? In my letter to Congressman Engle I wrote the following:

"I know that there are a few — fortunately a very few — people in Puerto Rico who, because they are self-deluded or are motivated by conscious political ambitions, take it upon themselves to spread misinformation. Some of those people distort innocent facts and trivial events to serve their purposes; others draw on their fevered imaginations and invent occurrences that never happened and motives that never existed. I am sure that you, with your vast experience in politics, understand this process; and I hope and believe that you will not accept such communications without inquiry and verification. I hasten to say that there is not a great deal of this kind of activity; but the few people engaged in it turn out their product in substantial quantity and direct most of it to your desk and the desks of some other members of Congress."

As an example, every Fourth of July and every Twenty-fifth of July there are comments on the use of the flags. On both occasions, as is proper and natural, flags are displayed of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and of the Union — that is the United States of America. It is natural that on the Fourth of July — a date which is a source of pride for all Americans everywhere — the flag should predominate which belongs to all American citizens who remember the date with affection and pride. It is equally natural that on the 25th of July (Commonwealth Day), a date of special celebration specifically for Puerto Ricans — naturally not for Texans or Californians — the flag related to that celebration should be used in the decorations. (I say decoration because both flags are together in official use on both occasions.)

What happens? No comment is made on the profuse display of American flags which are so prominent on the date which belongs to all American citizens in all parts of the world; but, year after year, despite annual repetition of what I have just explained to you here, critical comments are made on the use of many Puerto Rican flags on the date that has special and specific significance for Puerto Ricans.

The aforesaid small group point out, for instance, that at the police training camp on Cabras Island a Puerto Rican flag is flown but not one of the United States. Omitted, however, is the explanation that Isla de Cabras is at the entrance of San Juan harbor, and that, at the right of that entrance, the United States flag flies over Morro Castle, while at the left the Puerto Rican flag flies over Isla de Cabras; and that that symbol of proud union is precisely the symbolic function of the two flags at the harbor's entrance, as it also is on every public building, every civic parade, every Puerto Rican school. Puerto Rico's



American citizens can feel a deep pride in their American citizenship without belittling themselves as Puerto Ricans.

Moreover, I cannot see how anyone can truly honor his status as an American who consciously or unconsciously believes that in order to do so he must belittle his status as a Virginian, a Texan or a Puerto Rican. On the Continent there are some states that give more importance to their symbols than do others. There are those states that have a more distinctive historical personality, like Virginia and Texas. They tend to give more rather than less importance to their monuments and symbols. It is characteristic of America's culture of freedom that the citizens feel free, according to their own inclinations, to give a greater or a lesser importance to the symbols of this local pride.

We should ask ourselves: What are these gentlemen trying to achieve? If the Congress of the United States should begin to believe that anti-Americanism is growing here, would that, perhaps, persuade the Congress to give federal statehood to Puerto Rico, even though such statehood has not been requested? Or would it not, rather, make the Congress think of independence for Puerto Rico? Or does that small group perhaps want to see the reestablishment of a colonial regime in Puerto Rico, to anguish Puerto Rico and to shame the United States?

Gentlemen, gentlemen, think what you are doing. And you, friends in the Chamber of Commerce, help them to come to their senses.

What more might those gentlemen be aiming at? Do they think that investments in new industries will increase on the strength of a belief on the continent that anti-Americanism exists here? Please, gentlemen, please!

With regard to the Commonwealth, I state again that it is a new political concept, in which more emphasis tends to be



given to local liberties than to participation in the federal government. The Commonwealth's desire to compensate through local freedom for the lack of full participation in the federal government is most natural for American citizens who honestly and honorably believe that federal statehood would be impractical from the United States viewpoint as well as the Puerto Rican, but who are nevertheless definitely committed to the permanent union of Puerto Rico and the United States.

I believe that the more the Commonwealth status is perfected the stronger the sense of union will become. What could loosen the ties would be the stagnation of Commonwealth status in the face of the historical truth that no other form of permanent union is practical for Puerto Rico.

The campaign to confuse the Congress of the United States can, as we see, create a serious obstacle to Puerto Rico's continued progress. I would not charge the members of the small group which engineers that confusion with bad faith, because they do more harm to their own personal convictions than to anything else. And courtesy forbids me to charge them with stupidity. I advise you, my friends who hear me, that you counsel that small group to become aware of the harm they may do to the cause in which they believe, and in which, in the sense of permanent association with the American Union, the great majority of us Puerto Ricans believe.

Regarding myself, you and all Puerto Rico have my vision and my word: Commonwealth status, in my considered judgment and irrevocable conviction, is the best and surest possible guarantee of our permanent ties with the great American Union, with which we are associated through two noble and great moral forces: our citizenship and our freely expressed desire to remain forever in that association.