

# Fernos's Retirement

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The retirement of Dr. Antonio Fernos Isern closes another important chapter in Puerto Rican history. As Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner in Washington for 18 years, Fernos has played a key role in this island's spectacular successes and failures.

The Popular Party leadership is now deeply involved in coming up with a replacement. Most often mentioned are the names of Teodoro Moscoso, Rafael Pico and Arturo Morales Carrion. There is talk even of Gov. Muñoz taking the job and having someone else run for Governor.

The idea is that the Office of Resident Commissioner has been, is and will be so vital for Puerto Rico, that the Popular Party cannot afford to make an error. The job must go to the very best that the party can come up with: and a run-down of Fernos's history in office will show you why.

The significance of Fernos's office arises out of the political peculiarities of Commonwealth status. Puerto Rico is associated with the U.S. but it does not have the right to vote for the President or have any voting representation in Congress. When Puerto Rico was a colony, its Governor and other high officials were appointed by the President and thus there was a direct line between La Fortaleza and the White House. Now, the Resident Commissioner, who sits in the U.S. House of Representatives with voice but no vote, is the only representative link between Puerto Rico and the United States.

Fernos went to Washington in 1946 after he had served as Secretary of Health for the Muñoz-led government that had come into power in 1940. A physician by profession, Fernos had been one of the early supporters of the Popular Party. Perhaps one of the most significant things that Fernos did as Health Secretary was to allow the government's aggressive birth control program to die. This is partly to blame for the critical population explosion today.

As Resident Commissioner, Fernos had the responsibility in 1947 of getting through Congress a bill to allow Puerto Rico to elect its own government. Although a novice at the job, Fernos and a group of pro-Puerto Rican law-makers just managed to get the bill approved before Congress adjourned.

Two years later, Puerto Rico began to work with Congress on the creation of Commonwealth status. Fernos's job was to get the necessary laws through Congress. Back in Puerto Rico, he was highly honored by being made President of the Constitutional Convention. Finally, in 1952, the island's new Commonwealth Constitution went into effect.

Those were the big successes: and now the failures were to come. From the beginning, Muñoz and his followers had admitted that the creation of Commonwealth has been a rushed and incomplete job. In 1959, Muñoz made the first attempt to improve the defects of Commonwealth.

The Fernos-Murray bill was introduced. It created a storm of protest among statehooders here; it received luke-warm support from the Eisenhower administration; and it died in Congress. It was a hard blow to Muñoz and his party.

The consensus then was that the bill had been grossly mishandled. Clearly Fernos was among the people who had to share the blame for the bill's defeat.

But compared to what was coming that was a minor defeat. In 1962, with "friend" John F. Kennedy in the White House fully endorsing him, Muñoz announced that he was going to seek from Congress, in one big swoop, the "culmination of Commonwealth." But Congress was so unprepared, uninformed and, in some cases, unsympathetic, that it crudely chopped down Muñoz's Grand Design for the "perfection" of Commonwealth (which included the right to vote for President) to a bill forming a status "study commission."

Most of the blame for this sad defeat rested squarely on Muñoz's shoulders. He had personally done most of the negotiations with Congressional and Administration leaders. But it was evident that Fernos had been particularly ineffective. The then 68-year-old "doctor" simply seemed unable to deal with a Congress no longer moved sympathetically by "poor Puerto Rico." The word circulating in San Juan since mid-1963 has been that this would be Fernos's last term.

Now Fernos's office is considered even more important than in the past. Within the next four years, Puerto Rico expects Congress to act on a "definite" status solution; be it culminated Commonwealth, statehood or independence. This is the purpose of the status study commission. The responsibility facing the next Resident Commissioner may well be greater than at any time in island history.

And the challenge may also be greater because Puerto Rico's relation with the U.S. is changing. Whereas in the 1950's, the U.S. looked at Puerto Rico as an admirable example of a people making enormous progress under self-government and the U.S. flag, today the admiration has turned a bit into suspicion.

There is no question that some industrialization-minded states in the South are concerned about Puerto Rico's privileged tax-free association with the U.S. The Federal government, furthermore, is constantly watching out that Puerto Rico does not become a "tax haven" for U.S. industries seeking to avoid paying Federal taxes. The U.S. rightist elements, which now control the Republican Party, are also wary of Muñoz's "leftist" government and tendencies.

As Fernos retires, he leaves a balanced record of successes and failures. If his soft-spoken, shy nature did not impress many people, it certainly did not alienate, either. And most observers are glad he agrees that he should give way to a younger, more energetic person better attuned to modern power politics and tactics.