



JENNIFFER A. GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN
SPEAKER

**H.R. 2499 - Presentation before the Committee of
Speaker Jenniffer González-Colón**

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members,

I am the Speaker of the Puerto Rico House of Representatives, here on behalf of over four million of your fellow citizens living in Puerto Rico.

We are American citizens, but we cannot vote for our nation's President and do not have a voting representation in this Congress. We have one representative who cannot vote in the full House ... not even for this bill, which determines our future.

In the past days, we have witnessed millions of people marching and protesting in a distant land, to defend the votes they cast. They are risking their lives to defend their right to vote.

I am here to support HR 2499 because we, four million of your fellow citizens, also have the right to choose our destiny.

HR 2499 would finally authorize our people to have a binding vote on whether we want to maintain the current political condition, or choose a different one.

Critics argue that the bill is not fair and that it leans the vote against the current relationship. Not true.

The basic question before the voters is whether they still agree - and consent- to live in a territory.

If the voters support the current relationship, then, it is clear that the majority of Puerto Ricans truly favor the current colonial arrangement.

However, if the territory is democratically rejected, it means that the majority of Puerto Ricans no longer give their consent to the territorial government.

If that is the case, then Puerto Ricans will choose between status options that end the territorial and colonial condition.

Critics also argue that the process lacks consensus. I do not agree.

The language of the bill reflects our resident commissioner's efforts to address objections of opponents – well-grounded or not.

For instance, I believe that the current undemocratic arrangement *is* the problem – and *it* should not even be an option. Yet, note that the proposal, first of all, allows Puerto Ricans who support the present relationship a vote to keep it.

Further, note that the bill does not label the current “Commonwealth” as territorial nor does it state that under it, Puerto Rico is subject to congressional authority under the Territories Clause -- allowing some supporters to continue their claims that it is not.

I also reject the claim of lack of consensus as an objection to the bill because, ultimately, some simply use it to further delay Puerto Ricans' right to vote between non-territorial and non-colonial options.

There *is* consensus that a non-colonial solution is needed. ***But***, if what critics mean by “consensus” is ***unanimity***, about means and ends, then that's just a way to prevent anything from happening.

Despite the numerous bills that have been discussed in this Congress, to this day, supporters of some sort of new territory are still debating exactly what they want to propose.

In multiple occasions, and throughout various processes in 1989, 1991, 1996, and 1998, members of the House and the Senate rejected the variations presented by those who favor an “enhanced” form of the territorial government because they were simply not viable under the Constitution. Accordingly, and after a strong lobbying effort, the processes have been delayed, ironically, because supporters of the current relationship cannot even reach an internal “consensus” on what they want.

But, while they attempt to reach a consensus in their highly mutating territorial option, they continue to deny the rest of their fellow citizens a right to vote.

That should not be the case on this occasion, because, as mentioned above, the current territory is on the first ballot.

As further evidence that this is a fair proposal, we note that it does *not* include – as some requested – as an alternative to the current Commonwealth the proposal that Puerto Rico be empowered to nullify federal laws, to enter into international agreements while being in an association with the U.S. that the U.S. cannot change and, further, that the U.S. be permanently required to provide always more benefits than at present - proposals that this Committee and all other federal authorities have said are impossible.

As you can see, despite arguments to the contrary, the language of the bill genuinely reflects our resident commissioner's efforts to address opponents' objections.

I have to add that our resident commissioner has made that effort, despite the fact that differences as to how we would resolve the fundamental issue of Puerto Rico's status were clear to voters in the last election.

Opponents of the process encompassed by the bill ran on a platform that included the arguments brought forth today. They not only lost, but they lost overwhelmingly. Advocates of this process and this bill won most offices in Puerto Rico; including the governorship, the resident commissioner, as well as the State House and Senate. The will of the people is clear.

Finally, a lot has been said about the fact that in over 111 years, Puerto Ricans have never been given a real opportunity by the Congress to hold a binding vote between viable alternatives to this fundamental issue. The time has come for this to change. As citizens of the greatest democracy in history, it is our right.

As the heirs of the Revolution of 1776, this government should not allow one more day to go by without at least asking four million of its citizens whether they further consent to live under a government based on "legislation without representation."

