

# Committee on Resources

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## Testimony

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### Full Committee

Wednesday, March 19, 1997

1324 Longworth HOB, 11:00 A.M.

The United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act  
(H.R. 856)

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*Statement by  
The Honorable Pedro Rosselló  
Governor of Puerto Rico  
Presented at a hearing of the  
Committee on Resources  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, D.C.  
March 19, 1997*

Chairman Don Young;  
Ranking Democrat, Congressman George Miller;  
members of the Committee on Resources:

My name is Pedro Rosselló. Since 1993, I have been Governor of Puerto Rico. In that capacity, on two occasions, I presented statements to the 104th Congress that may be of interest to each of you.

On October 17, 1995, here in Washington, I addressed a hearing conducted jointly by this Committee's Native American and Insular Affairs Subcommittee and by the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the House Committee on International Relations.

Then, on March 23, 1996, I appeared before the Native American and Insular Affairs Subcommittee at a hearing conducted in San Juan.

My October 1995 statement pertained to a November 1993 political status consultation, organized by the Government of Puerto Rico with the full support of all three Puerto Rico political parties.

My March 1996 statement pertained to H.R. 3024: a bill filed by Chairman Young, which bore the same title as the measure before us today.

Because of their relevance, and because they may be particularly useful to members of this Committee who did not serve on the aforementioned Subcommittees of the last Congress, I shall be grateful if the Chairman will make copies of those statements available to every member of the Committee on Resources of this 105th Congress.

Although I am the president of a political party, and although I do strongly advocate one specific solution to Puerto Rico's status dilemma, I wish to emphasize at the outset that my declarations at this hearing shall be made solely in my role as chief executive of the Government of Puerto Rico and on behalf of the people of Puerto Rico, as the recipient this past November of the largest electoral mandate granted to any gubernatorial candidate in Puerto Rico since 1964.

In addressing you as Governor, and as the spokesperson for a strong mandate from the people to move toward the final definition and decision on our political status, I see it as my duty to concentrate exclusively on offering my assistance as you commence the profoundly important process of evaluating H.R. 856, the *United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act*.

For the past eight years, both the people of Puerto Rico and the United States Government have manifested a commendable commitment to addressing this issue seriously, responsibly and in an impressively non-partisan manner.

In 1989, a pro-"commonwealth" Governor enlisted the backing of all three Puerto Rico political parties in soliciting action from the Federal Government. That petition produced an earnest, positive response from a Republican President and a Congress controlled by Democrats. More than two years of dedicated effort resulted from that initiative. The effort fell short. But it did not fail. Rather, it left behind a valuable foundation upon which we have been building ever since.

And so it was that my administration - led by a pro-statehood Governor - succeeded four years ago in maintaining a united front of Puerto Rico political parties in resuming the quest for a solution to the status dilemma. And so it was too that - with a Democrat in the White House and Republican majorities on Capitol Hill - Washington has remained equally united, since 1995, in pursuit of a mutually satisfactory remedy to the universally acknowledged inadequacy of Puerto Rico's current relationship with the rest of our fellow citizens of the United States of America.

President Bill Clinton reiterated his commitment at the beginning of this year. In a letter that was read aloud by his personal representative, during my second-term inauguration ceremony in January, the President wrote: "I will work with you, the islands' other elected leaders, the Congress, and all concerned to establish a process that would enable the fundamental issue of Puerto Rico's political status to finally be resolved."

Here in the House, for their part, Chairman Young and Ranking Member Miller have mobilized a broad bipartisan coalition -- with the solid backing of Speaker Newt Gingrich and the gentleman from Puerto Rico, Congressman Carlos Romero-Barceló.

On the Senate side, Chairman Frank Murkowski visited Puerto Rico this past weekend, leading a bipartisan delegation from his Energy and Natural Resources Committee. The Senators held lengthy meetings with senior officials from the political parties representing Puerto Rico status options.

In light of these developments, I can state for the record that the people of Puerto Rico are looking forward with enthusiasm to the imminent exercise by Congress of its constitutional responsibility to collaborate with us on converting the chronic conundrum of Puerto Rico's status into a shining star of statesmanship.

I am convinced that together we can do it.

Through determination, persistence, unflagging effort and an unshakable allegiance to patriotic civility, we

can do it.

Moreover, we can do it expeditiously.

I commend you, Mister Chairman, for having requested of each Puerto Rico political party that it submit by March 31 a proposed definition which it believes will be most appropriate for the status option it supports. It is my understanding that each of the parties intends to comply with that request.

You acted expeditiously, Mr. Chairman, in filing H.R. 856.

You acted expeditiously in scheduling this hearing.

You acted expeditiously in requesting status definitions.

And I would urge that we likewise expedite the entire process contemplated by this bill.

A year ago this week, in my testimony regarding H.R. 3024, I proposed that the process be streamlined. Like that earlier bill, H.R. 856 envisions "a transition plan of 10 years minimum which leads to full self-government for Puerto Rico consistent with the terms of this Act"

Nothing has transpired during the past 12 months to alter my outlook on this aspect of the legislation. Accordingly, I take this opportunity to urge once again that this bill's three stages - **initial decision, transition, and implementation** -- be consolidated into two stages.

I feel certain that the **transition and implementation** stages can be combined in such a way as to eliminate any need for conducting the interim referendum that is stipulated by the bill under the provisions set forth in its transition stage.

If the people of Puerto Rico do embrace full self-government during the initial decision stage, then I see no reason why ten-or-more additional years must elapse before we are able to cast definitive "yes-or-no" votes on a Presidentially-submitted and Congressionally-approved implementation formula.

A "streamlining" of this nature would save time, energy and money; it would facilitate completion of the entire process, with the utmost, focused attention to detail, during a time period that could easily be reduced to a maximum of four-to-five years.

But more than that, by expediting matters we can help to ensure that the *United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act* achieves its purpose because -- by expediting matters -- we can greatly enhance the likelihood that the momentum of this historic undertaking will not be weakened by unforeseen events that could occur as we go forward.

And furthermore, it would send a strong message to all that Congress is ready and committed to act.

When I first offered this suggestion at the San Juan hearing of March 1996, my exact words were these: "Ten years, I respectfully submit, is an inordinately long time. Ten years ago, there were two Germanys and a Berlin Wall; South Africa was still under apartheid; the North American Free Trade Agreement was merely a promising idea; and almost nobody had ever heard of the Internet. A ten-year minimum, I believe, is more time than we need."

Today, in March 1997, I stand by those words. I earnestly propose that a mechanism be designed that will allow the people of Puerto Rico and our fellow citizens throughout the United States to conclude, at the sunrise of the 21st century, an extremely significant item of unfinished business that has awaited this nation's undivided attention ever since the twilight hours of the 19th century.

To that end and in that spirit, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, you can count on me. You can count on me to work with you; with your Congressional colleagues; with the President; and with the people of Puerto Rico. You can count on my good faith, my good will, and my unwavering commitment to the fundamental principle of civil rights and human dignity that this bill so eloquently embodies: the principle of liberty and justice for all.

May God bless each and every person who participates in this noble endeavor.

Thank you very much.

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