

# Puerto Rican Statehood

*English must be a precondition*

By K.C. McALPIN

Like a bad penny that keeps coming back, members of Congress are busy again trying to make Puerto Rico our 51<sup>st</sup> state. Rep. Jose Serrano, D-N.Y. has introduced H.R. 900, the Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2007. If Congress passes it, Puerto Ricans would have to vote for the fourth time in forty years on whether they want their island nation to remain a self-governing U.S. commonwealth, or become a U.S. state.

exercise again, since they have gone to the polls and rejected statehood three times before, the last time occurring in 1998.

There are other reasons to question this bill. One is that its name, Puerto Rico 'Democracy' Act, is misleading. Puerto Rico is already a democracy and it is wrong to suggest otherwise. Worse, the Act itself is hardly 'democratic.' It proposes a two-stage referendum process that is rigged in favor of statehood.



**A young woman holds a banner during a pro-statehood demonstration. Puerto Rican nationalists routinely lobby congress for statehood. Puerto Rico has remained a U.S. commonwealth since 1952.**

One can be forgiven for wondering why Puerto Ricans should have to go through this costly

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But by far the most important reason to oppose H.R. 900 is that it does not require Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico to adopt English as the language of its government before it is considered for statehood. Should Puerto Rico becomes the 51<sup>st</sup> state without adopting English, it is sure to open up a Pandora's box of language-related evils that could lead to the

eventual break-up of the United States.

Statehood supporters say such concerns are unwarranted because Puerto Rico has made both Spanish and English official languages. But even though most well-educated Puerto Ricans speak English, and English is widely taught in the public schools, the island's four million residents are still overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking according to the Census. And the default language of Puerto Rico's day-to-day government operations is Spanish, not English.

Unless that changes and Puerto Rico agrees to conduct its government operations in English like all the other fifty states, admitting the Spanish-speaking island to the Union will have an immediate impact on the U.S. Puerto Rico is likely to demand that the federal government operate in both English and Spanish to accommodate its congressional representatives and its Spanish-speaking citizenry. That will give rise to speeches and debates in Spanish on the floors of Congress with simultaneous translation similar to what we now see at UN meetings.

The abrupt move toward Canadian-style bilingualism at the federal level will have a ripple affect throughout American society. It will send precisely the wrong message about the need to maintain our national unity in English at a time when the U.S. already is struggling to assimilate a large and rapidly growing Spanish-speaking immigrant population.

Politicians, always eager to broker interest group privileges in return for political support, will compete with each other to pose as champions of relatively cheap language entitlements. English speaking Americans, including many immigrants, alarmed at the rapid disintegration of their monolingual 'melting pot,' will grow increasingly resentful and wonder when it was that they voted to

become a bilingual society.

Meanwhile Spanish-dominant enclaves like South Florida and many other parts of the country, will grow larger and isolate an increasingly Spanish speaking lower class.

Over time these social tensions are sure to result in a growing Spanish-English divide and create the kind cultural-political fault lines that are fracturing the unity today of countries like Belgium, Canada, and the Ukraine. As Sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset noted, "The histories of bilingual and bicultural societies that do not assimilate are histories of turmoil, tension, and tragedy."

One way to avert a shipwreck over language would be for Congress to insist that Puerto Rico adopt English as the language of its government before it could be considered for statehood. Puerto Rican voters also

would have to understand that adopting English is a requirement if they decide to vote for statehood.

There is a precedent for insisting that territories adopt English as a precondition for statehood. In 1811 President James Madison signed the Louisiana Enabling Act that required predominantly French and Creole-speaking Louisiana to adopt English as the language of its government before it could be admitted to the Union.

But another solution would be for Congress to pass a constitutional amendment making English the sole official language of the U.S. government. Once ratified by the states, the amendment would end the argument, and with it any danger of a bilingual government.

One way or another it is clear the American people want to preserve our nation's historic unity in the English language. If Congress reopens the issue of Puerto Rican statehood it must confront the issue of language. ■

