

Puerto Rico's Future

Statehood advocates will continue to push that option, so vigilance is called for

by Gerda Bikales

On December 13, 1998, voters in Puerto Rico went to the polls to choose the type of relationship they want with the United States, an issue that has monopolized island politics for more than eighty years. For the second time in five years Puerto Ricans were asked to choose between applying to become our country's 51st state, maintaining their current commonwealth status (in effect since 1952), or seeking total independence from the United States.

When the votes were all counted, retaining the status quo of commonwealth was once again the winner. Yet, in early December, just days before the plebiscite, polls had indicated a decided voter preference for statehood. What had happened to prove the prognosticators wrong?

It is easy enough to explain the strong pro-statehood sentiments that seemed to prevail as the plebiscite approached. The statehood party is in control of the governor's mansion and the legislature, and it had used its political muscle to define "commonwealth" in the ballot description as an abject form of colonial subjugation, thereby causing the commonwealth party to bolt from that choice in favor of a hastily created alternative, "none of the above." Statehood advocates played on the fears of Puerto Ricans that their valuable American citizenship, granted by Congress in 1917, may be revoked any time unless they act quickly to become a state.

Having allocated itself a very generous budget for lobbying in Washington and for saturation media advertising in Puerto Rico, the statehood party bombarded television viewers with images of an endless stream of dollars flowing from the United States to the island, as soon as it joined the Union. Other advertising repeated assurances that no cultural and linguistic

adjustments would be expected of Puerto Ricans — the 51st state would retain its Latin American character and its traditional Spanish language undiminished. Why, then, would anyone not vote for the ultimate free lunch?

Under the leadership of chairman Leo Sorensen, English Language Advocates, a national public interest organization, stepped into this dense fog of preposterous false promises and carefully crafted public misconceptions. In the week before the plebiscite Sorensen, accompanied by staffer Phillips Hinch and myself, traveled to Puerto Rico to bring a very different message to the public. The full acceptance of English, they insisted, is a non-negotiable prerequisite for joining the Union of States. Because the United States categorically refuses to become a bilingual nation, a candidate for statehood insisting on conducting its affairs in a language other than English will be vigorously opposed by mainstream America and inevitably rejected by its elected representatives in the Congress.

In a series of meetings with highly placed leaders of all factions and with representatives of the press, the ELA team repeated this message forcefully. Its ads, placed in the leading English- and Spanish-language newspapers, were picked up by the media and became the subject of extensive news coverage and commentary in the critical weekend before the vote.

The plebiscite had defied predictions. Despite political manipulations that had divided the commonwealth vote into "commonwealth," "free association" (a form of enhanced commonwealth status), and "none of the above," the "statehood" option mustered only 46.5 percent. It won neither a majority nor a plurality. That honor went to "none of the above" — the clear winner with 50.2 percent of the vote.

A forceful voice asserting unequivocally that the United States is and will remain an English-speaking nation had resonated with many voters and had made a difference.

In the aftermath of this defeat one might think that

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the push for Puerto Rico's entry into the Union of States has been stilled for a decade or more, until the island's people have time to weigh evolving conditions and reevaluate their position. But that is not likely to happen. Never mind the vote count — the statehood spinmeisters are busy declaring victory. They are determined to get legislation on changing the status of the territory introduced in the new Congress, again and again, to hold

plebiscite after plebiscite, to press on for their cause until everyone tires of the game and becomes more pliant.

It is the job of English Language Advocates to keep the American people wide awake and alert to the dangers of an American "Quebec" represented by a Spanish-speaking state. Falling asleep on the job is not an option.