

The thin edge of the wedge

Once Again — El Estado de Puerto Rico?

by Gerda Bikales

When a Senate Committee defeated a bill that would have cleared the way for Puerto Rican statehood, early in 1991, many who follow this issue imagined that it had been shelved for at least this millennium. Wrong! A new bill designed to pave the way to statehood has been introduced and is showing some signs of life in the House of Representatives.

What incentives drive the return to this problem so soon again? Basically, there are two: the calendar and economics.

The year 1998 will mark the one hundredth anniversary of Puerto Rico's association with the United States. The island, which had been ruled for four hundred years by Spain, was ceded to the U.S. in the aftermath of the Spanish-American war. The approaching centennial appears to some the right time to ask again whether the current status of Puerto Rico as a quasi-independent Commonwealth is sustainable over the long-term, and to plan for possible alternatives. Should Puerto Rico become fully independent? Should it join the Union as the 51st state? According to proposed legislation, Puerto Ricans would soon hold a binding plebiscite to choose between these options.

The economic card is being played by two separate camps, with totally opposite objectives. Fiscal conservatives looking for ways to raise revenues want to eliminate the special tax breaks enjoyed by industries that bring jobs to Puerto

Rico, a concession that has made the Commonwealth option economically viable.

But statehood supporters also want to eliminate the tax breaks, precisely because they are the economic foundation of the Commonwealth. They don't worry about the ensuing collapse, for they know that the American government, far from saving money through higher corporate revenues, will be spending much more of it on enhanced welfare programs. Jobs may indeed leave the island, but as a state Puerto Rico will be entitled to more generous public assistance payments that will easily compensate for all losses. "Statehood is for the Poor" is the title of a propaganda tract written by a former Governor and statehood advocate, a title that has become the unofficial slogan of the Statehood Party.

What's At Stake for Puerto Rico?

In a 1967 plebiscite on the status of Puerto Rico, pro-Commonwealth voters carried the day with 60 percent of the total vote. Since that time, popular sentiment has shifted markedly toward statehood. In the most recent plebiscite, held in November 1993, the Commonwealth option failed to win a majority of the votes. It nevertheless pulled through by a small margin — 48.6 versus 46.3 percent for Commonwealth. The remaining votes supported independence.

The status issue has monopolized Puerto Rican politics since the beginning of its association with the United States. Its resolution is complicated by an inherent conflict in the mind of the voters between economic realism and cultural idealism. Close association with the U.S. has raised the standard of living of this overpopulated and impoverished island, to a level well above that of its Caribbean neighbors. Only statehood can guarantee the permanence of this advantageous relationship, which has provided not only huge infusions of money but also an escape valve for excess population — Puerto Ricans are American

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citizens free to relocate to the mainland. According to the 1990 Census, some 3.5 million people lived on the island, while 2.7 million Puerto Ricans lived on the mainland.

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But Puerto Ricans have remained fiercely loyal to the Spanish language of their former rulers, and have actively resisted accepting English. Though the island has been officially bilingual since 1902, fewer than half the inhabitants speak English well. Puerto Ricans have a strong sense of themselves as a people culturally different from the U.S. mainland population, and have shown their determination to hold on to this difference.

The Puerto Ricans' sharp awareness of their separate cultural identity has been the Independence Party's trump card. Independence spokesmen highlight the cultural chasm between islanders and mainlanders at every opportunity. As Ruben Berrios-Martinez, the party's president, told a U.S. Senate Committee in 1991, Puerto Ricans are

... a people who constitute a historically distinct nationality, inhabiting a separate and distinct territory, who speak a different language, who aspire to maintain a separate identity. ...Puerto Rico is almost the prototype of a nationality, and undoubtedly one of the most homogeneous nationalities in the New World.

The Independence Party's poor showing at the polls is deceptive, for it remains the sentimental favorite of many who don't vote for it. Were the Commonwealth option to disappear through changes in the tax code, support for independence would increase greatly, though it would assuredly lose in the end to the pocket-book realism of statehood. Yet such a loss would not spell the end of the Puerto Rican independence movement,

which has already demonstrated its zeal through a number of assassinations on the island, an attempt on the life of President Truman, a shoot-out in the U.S. House of Representatives, and the blowing up of a historic building in New York, causing four deaths. A warning from Berrios-Martinez leaves little to the imagination:

Citizens of Hispanic or Latin American extraction — a significant portion of them Puerto Ricans — are expected to approximate almost half of the U. S. population in the third decade of the next century. Under such circumstances, a Latin American state like Puerto Rico could become a disruptive and divisive factor threatening the fabric of American federalism... [Political] Majorities and minorities come and go, but nationalities remain and Puerto Rican "independistas" will never give up our inalienable right to struggle for independence.

What's At Stake

For the United States?

To neutralize the power of the language issue, the Statehood leadership has been trying to reassure Puerto Rican voters by telling them that they can have it both ways. In the words of Carlos Romero Barcelo, a former Governor and Statehood Party leader: "We must tell the nation it is not the congressional intention to force the English language on us." Governor Romero may not be joking.

Unlike the people of Puerto Rico, who can vote on the issue, the people of the United States will have no direct say in whether Puerto Rico becomes a state. They must rely on Congress to represent their best interests in this matter, and Congress has shown itself disinclined to follow precedents that required accommodation to English as a condition for statehood (Louisiana, 1812; Oklahoma, 1907; New Mexico, 1912; Arizona, 1912). The 1991 legislation was entirely silent on the issue of language, while the current bill, known as the U.S.-Puerto Rico Political Status Act, has a vague mention of it that could be interpreted as something other than sincere insistence on English as the language of the new state.

There is a Catch 22 inherent in the American people's attitude toward Puerto Rico: so utterly

"foreign" is the potential new state that most Americans have little awareness of it or of its political relationship to the United States, and would have trouble believing that ongoing political processes may soon make the island our 51st state. Yet, unless they somehow become knowledgeable about the possibility of statehood for a Spanish-speaking island-nation and assert themselves against it, they will wake up one day to discover that theirs has become the second officially bilingual-multicultural country on the North American continent. No further legislation or formal declaration will be necessary, as our Constitution assures mutual acceptance by all states of "the public Acts, Records, and judicial Proceedings" of every state.

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In the last three decades, we have seen a gradual but steady erosion of the cultural bonds that once tied us securely to one another, sustaining a strong sense of American nationhood despite our many differences. The admission of a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rico to the Union would accelerate that erosion and lead the United States on the road to becoming the “untied” States of America.

Along the way, we would witness the televised swearing-in ceremonies in Spanish of the new state's two Senators and five Congressmen, followed by the arrival of armies of translators in Congress and in all branches of government, the publication of all government proceedings, forms and reports in the two recognized languages of the newly constituted federation of 51 states, the institution of a bilingual civil service that favors native Spanish-speakers, the forced immersion of

school children in Spanish classes, and the appropriation of billions of tax dollars to pay for these services. We can also expect the "Independistas" to keep their word, and exact a price in American blood and destruction for the purchase of our very own version of Quebec.

A Personal Note

Sitting at a cafe not far from the Champs Elysee, I read the headline stories in *Le Monde* and in *Le Figaro* with much interest these days. There is a lot in the news about the deteriorating situation in Corsica, a Mediterranean island that has been under French control since 1768. Corsica is a "departement," of the French Republic, an integral part of France, the equivalent of what we in the U.S. would consider a "state" of the Union.

There is a problem, though. A small minority of Corsicans doesn't care to be a part of France. They aspire to political and cultural independence, pointing to the Italian dialect that is the island's heritage, and traditions more rooted in nepotism and piracy than in respect for French law.

This cultural self-awareness has created a number of nationalist political factions fanatically determined to secure an independent Corsica, constantly at war with each other and with the exasperated French authorities. Government buildings regularly get blown up and warring political opponents are killed off. At the rate murders are proceeding on the island, its 250,000 inhabitants are in danger of being decimated before any workable settlement is ever agreed on. The chaos has reached such proportions that Corsica is regularly referred to as *hors-la-loi*, outside the reach of the law. Such statements are not designed to bolster the tourism industry, the backbone of the local economy, which is now in free fall.

A procession of high level ministers in President Jacques Chirac's government is making reassuring in-and-out appearances on the island. The latest buzz-word seems to be "positive dialogue," coupled with throwing lots of money at the problem, in the form of more loans for tourist facilities that may never be needed and the creation of a free-trade zone that already angers nearby Sicily and Sardinia.

And I wonder as I read: does anybody else see any lessons for us in all this?