



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement as Prepared for Delivery
“Puerto Rico at its Political Crossroads: A Forum to Discuss the Political Future of the Island”
Cannon Caucus Room
September 12, 2011

Thank you, Tony, for that kind introduction. I want to welcome you all to this morning’s event, entitled “Puerto Rico at its Political Crossroads: A Forum to Discuss the Political Future of the Island.” I am pleased to see so many familiar faces in the audience and just as pleased to see a number of new faces.

I want to begin by thanking the University of Puerto Rico Alumni and Friends Abroad, the National Puerto Rican Coalition, and the ASPIRA Association for hosting this forum, and MicroTech for its generous sponsorship.

Next, I want to extend a warm welcome to today’s moderator, Ray Suarez. As all of you know, Mr. Suarez is one of the most respected and trusted journalists in the country. I have appeared as a guest on Mr. Suarez’s television programs several times, and always come away deeply impressed with his knowledge of the Puerto Rico status issue and Island issues more broadly. Mr. Suarez: thank you so much for taking the time to be here.

I also want to welcome Dr. Edwin Melendez, the Director of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College in New York City. Dr. Melendez will be delivering remarks on the Puerto Rican diaspora and its views on the status issue.

Finally, I want to welcome our esteemed panelists: my good friend and Puerto Rico's Secretary of State, Kenneth McClintock; Eduardo Bhatia; and Dr. Manuel Rodriguez-Orellana. I hope the audience realizes how fortunate they are to hear from three such articulate advocates for their respective causes.

I want to do more listening than talking this morning, but I would like to offer a few introductory remarks to help frame the issue, especially for those of you in the audience who may be new to this complex and fascinating subject.

Puerto Rico was ceded to the United States in the treaty that ended the Spanish-American War in 1898. In 1917, a federal statute conferred U.S. citizenship on individuals born in Puerto Rico. In the first half of the 20th century, Congress took steps to grant the government of Puerto Rico increased authority over local matters, and in the early 1950s authorized the Island to adopt a local constitution. Nonetheless, Puerto Rico remains an unincorporated territory of the United States, subject to Congress's plenary power under the Territory Clause of the Constitution.

Territory status has inherent and indisputable defects. Puerto Rico's 3.7 million residents lack the most basic right in a democracy: voting representation in the government that makes their national laws. And because of Puerto Rico's status, Island residents are often treated unfairly

under federal health, education, security and social safety-net programs. The main argument used to justify unequal treatment for my constituents is that they do not pay federal taxes on local income. This argument has some superficial appeal, but overlooks the fact that nearly half of all households in the states do not pay federal income taxes and are still treated fairly by their government. Ultimately, unequal treatment serves to diminish and demean the countless contributions that residents of Puerto Rico have made to this nation—contributions that cannot be measured in mere dollars and cents. For generations, our sons and daughters have fought alongside their fellow citizens to protect freedom and democracy. Many have given their lives in defense of these values. Many more have borne the physical and emotional scars of their service to this country.

Puerto Rico's political status has always been—and remains today—the central issue in the territory's political life. The Island's three political parties are not divided along traditional Democrat and Republican lines, but rather based on their views on the status question, with one party favoring statehood, another party supporting the status quo or something resembling it, and the final party advocating independence. Elections in Puerto Rico are extraordinary affairs, with voter turnout often exceeding 80 percent. The status debates between the parties are spirited, but they should not obscure a fundamental truth: the vast majority of Island residents cherish their American citizenship, value their economic, social and political bonds with the United States, and are unlikely to choose a status option that could jeopardize either citizenship or closeness.

For over a century, resolution of Puerto Rico's status question has proven elusive. Not unreasonably, this has led to a degree of cynicism among some of my constituents, who wonder

whether, years from now, their grandchildren will be having the same impassioned—but ultimately fruitless—debates. However, in the last fifteen months, historic progress has been made on the federal level. And, as a result, frustration in Puerto Rico has begun to fade, replaced by a renewed faith in the future.

In the 111th Congress, the House of Representatives approved my bill, H.R. 2499, to authorize a two-stage plebiscite on the Island's political future. Although Puerto Rico does not need Congress's approval to hold a vote, House passage of 2499 accomplished two important objectives. Some in Puerto Rico are skeptical of whether Congress would consent to a new political status for the Island if a majority expressed the desire for change. When the People's House voted overwhelmingly—and in rare bipartisan fashion—to approve 2499, it sent a message to my constituents that Congress will honor the results of any fair plebiscite. House passage of 2499 also clarified that there are only three non-territory alternatives to the status quo: statehood, independence, and nationhood in free association with the U.S. Moreover, in the wake of the successful House vote, the lead Democrat and Republican on the Senate committee with jurisdiction over this issue sent a letter to President Obama confirming that the options set forth in 2499 were the only choices available to Puerto Rico. Inevitably, certain Island politicians will continue to promote status proposals other than the ones that Congress has identified as viable, but the people of Puerto Rico know when they are being misled and do not appreciate it.

Action by the House of Representatives and Senate leadership was followed by action from the White House. In March 2011, the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status issued a report

as candid as it was comprehensive. In addition to confirming Puerto Rico's three non-territory options, the Task Force stated that resolution of the status question should be an urgent priority, and expressed support for the government of Puerto Rico's plan to conduct a plebiscite process under local law. In June, President Obama traveled to Puerto Rico. It marked the first time in 50 years that a sitting president made an official trip to the U.S. territory. In a nationally-televised message from San Juan, the President emphasized that the federal government should implement the results of any fair process held on the Island to determine the public's will, stating: "[W]hen the people of Puerto Rico make a clear decision, my administration will stand by you."

In short, in the last 15 months, the federal government has taken decisive steps to advance the cause of self-determination in Puerto Rico and—at long last—to bring a resolution to the Island's status dilemma. Now, the ball rests squarely in Puerto Rico's court. Political leaders on the Island should advocate for the status they support, explaining why they believe that option is superior to the available alternatives. But, ultimately, it is the people of Puerto Rico who will determine their destiny in a democratic vote. There are some Island politicians who claim to support self-determination but fight to prevent any plebiscite process, no matter how it is structured, because they fear the possible result. These obstructionists are on the wrong side of history, and they will not prevail. The people of Puerto Rico will soon vote to decide the political future of the Island they love and, as they always do, they will cast their ballots in huge numbers. If a majority of voters express a preference for one of the three non-territory status options—and if I am still privileged to represent them in Washington when they do—then I will introduce legislation in Congress to implement their will. And with my allies in the White House and Congress, I will fight fiercely for its passage.

Thank you very much—and I hope you enjoy this morning's event.