



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement as Prepared For Delivery
Fourteenth Annual LULAC National Legislative Awards Gala
J.W. Marriott
Washington, DC
February 10, 2011

Good evening. *Buenas noches a todos.*

I want to begin by thanking Margaret Moran, Brent Wilkes, Juan Carlos Lizardi and the entire LULAC organization for honoring me with this award. I am deeply grateful for this kind gesture. I also want to extend a warm *abrazo* to my good friend, Puerto Rico Senator Lucy Arce, and the other members of the Puerto Rico delegation, which participates in this legislative conference every year. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not pause for a moment to recognize Daniel Hernandez, who was honored earlier this evening. Daniel: I have been so impressed by you. I know that you would like nothing better than to undo the tragic event that gave rise to your gallant actions and that has earned you the gratitude of a nation. Your boss—and my colleague—Gabrielle Giffords is in our thoughts tonight. Because of her remarkable fortitude—and because of your character, competence and composure

—I can look forward to the day that I will see her walk again onto the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

In the few minutes I have, I would like to briefly discuss two subjects that are close to my heart. The first, Puerto Rico's political destiny, is my personal and professional passion. Indeed, more than any other single factor, it was my desire to help achieve a just solution to the century-old status question that motivated me to return to public service and run for Congress.

The second issue, U.S. immigration policy, is also an intense interest of mine, but one of more recent vintage. Since becoming Resident Commissioner in 2009, I have served on the subcommittee within the House Judiciary Committee that has jurisdiction over immigration, and I am currently its only Hispanic member.

As you might suspect, the immigration debate does not necessarily arouse the same degree of passion in Puerto Rico as it does in other Latino communities, mainly because Island residents are American citizens who, for the cost of a plane ticket, can live and work without limitation anywhere in the United States. But just as the

treatment of my constituents should be of concern to Mexican-Americans in California, Cuban-Americans in Florida and Dominican-Americans in New York, so too should Puerto Ricans care deeply about the welfare of immigrants to this country, who sacrifice so much to make a better life for themselves and their families. The Latino population in the United States is diverse and cannot be painted with a single brush. But, despite our differences, we are—at core—a community, *una familia*. It is imperative that we support each other, that we defend each other, and that we fight for each other, just as we recently did with respect to the DREAM Act. When we unite, we are a powerful and persuasive force.

It is particularly critical that we stand with one another, shoulder-to-shoulder, to fundamentally reform our nation's broken immigration system and to improve our country's treatment of the people of Puerto Rico. In both areas, the status quo is untenable, unjust, and unworthy of this great nation. In each case, change is essential and long overdue.

Let me begin with the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico. For over 110 years, my constituents have had a political status that deprives them of the most basic right in

any democracy: the ability to participate meaningfully in the process of making the national laws that govern their lives. Although we are nearly four million proud, we cannot vote for our president and commander-in-chief, have no senators, and send a single, non-voting member to the House of Representatives.

Beyond our lack of self-government, we are also treated unequally as a matter of course. The federal laws and programs that treat residents of Puerto Rico worse than residents of the states are too numerous to count. The courts uphold such laws if there is any rational basis for the disparity, the lowest level of judicial scrutiny. The federal government can meet this test by arguing that equal treatment would be expensive or that residents of Puerto Rico do not pay federal taxes on local income. The tax argument is often successful despite the fact that more than 40 percent of households in the states do not pay federal income taxes but still receive equal treatment.

The hard—but unavoidable—truth is this: decades after women and African-Americans won fierce battles to gain their civil rights, residents of Puerto Rico continue to live as second-class citizens in their own country. As I have said candidly before, this state of affairs is made even more painful by the fact that

there are politicians in Puerto Rico who seek to play down or rationalize the unjust treatment we receive under the present status, and who insist that the status quo is preferable to the most realistic alternative—statehood. Because these leaders condone our current condition, they are partially responsible for it. It is convenient to simply blame Washington for our problems, but it obscures a central truth. The fault lies with us as well.

In 2009, in an effort to advance the cause of self-determination, I introduced H.R. 2499, legislation to authorize a congressionally-sponsored plebiscite process on the Island. Last April, this bill—which was endorsed by LULAC—was approved by the House in a strong bipartisan vote, *with nearly every Hispanic member of Congress voting yes*. With House passage, Congress sent two clear messages to the people of Puerto Rico. First, it made clear that the federal government is prepared to work to implement the results of any fair plebiscite held on the Island. Second, it clarified the valid status options, which is important because there continues to be uncertainty in Puerto Rico on this score. H.R. 2499 confirmed that we have four—and *only* four—viable options: the Island’s current territorial status, independence, statehood, and free association. Moreover, in December, the lead Democrat and Republican on the Senate committee with jurisdiction over the status issue sent an unprecedented letter to President Obama, expressing their view that

the status options set forth in H.R. 2499 are the only options available to Puerto Rico.

And that is where we stand today. I firmly believe that, at this point in time, Congress has done all that it is disposed to do on the status question. They have laid out the options and indicated that they will treat the results of any plebiscite among those options in a serious and solemn way. The ball is now in Puerto Rico's court. It is incumbent upon us to conduct a fair plebiscite at a time of our choosing. *We* must determine our destiny. Nobody else will do the hard work for us. Our future is in our own hands.

It is no secret that I strongly support statehood for Puerto Rico. There is little doubt that statehood would dramatically improve economic conditions in Puerto Rico, as it has done in every former U.S. territory. And just as statehood for Alaska and Hawaii enhanced and enriched the United States as a whole, statehood for Puerto Rico would create a stronger and more diverse nation. More fundamentally, for over a century my constituents have contributed immeasurably to this country in times of peace and war. For generations, our sons and daughters have served—and bled—alongside their fellow citizens from the states on battlefields around the world. During a late-night patrol in enemy territory, as soldiers from San Juan,

Sacramento and San Antonio watch each other's backs, the differences between them mean nothing. What matters is that the flag stitched to their uniform is the same. I support statehood because I believe the people of Puerto Rico have *earned* the right to become full and equal citizens of the United States.

Nonetheless, while I support statehood, I was elected to represent *all* of the people of Puerto Rico, including those whose vision for its future differs from my own. Those who support the current status, independence or free association are as entitled to their views as I am to mine. I respect their right to advocate for the status option they prefer. What I do *not* respect—and what I will fight against with every fiber of my being—are efforts by individuals or groups to obstruct the self-determination process because they fear this process will reveal the public's support for a status option other than the one they favor. These anti-democratic forces cannot be allowed to prevail.

Now let me turn to immigration. On this issue, unlike Puerto Rico's status, the solution can only originate in Washington, which must summon the political courage to enact comprehensive reform. It is clear that an "enforcement-only" approach, separate and apart from the moral problems it raises, will not be

effective. The Pew Hispanic Center found that there were approximately 11.2 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in 2010, about 8 million of whom were in the work force. Over 75% of this population is of Hispanic origin. These numbers are basically unchanged from 2009, despite high unemployment among U.S. workers, record-level deportations by the federal government, and vigorous efforts by numerous states to take action against unauthorized immigrants. Can there be more compelling evidence that calling for more police and more prosecutors is a simplistic and ultimately self-defeating approach to a complex problem?

The Latino community is indebted to my friend and colleague Luis Gutierrez for laying out a bold vision for comprehensive reform. I do not pretend to know the exact path or timeline for enacting reform, but I hope the national discussion will be guided by the following two thematic points. First, notwithstanding the petty point-scoring that too often masquerades as debate in Congress, comprehensive immigration reform can and should have the support of principled and pragmatic lawmakers from both sides of the political aisle. After all, it was President George W. Bush who said that an immigration reform bill “needs to be comprehensive, because all elements of this problem must be addressed together or none of them will be solved at all.” I am convinced that it is possible to craft—and enact—a

thoughtful, humane, balanced and clear-eyed bill that is faithful to the fact that we are a nation of immigrants *and* a nation of laws.

The second point is a familiar one, but in my view it cannot be emphasized enough. Although unauthorized immigrants are routinely scapegoated by politicians looking for a cheap applause line, the truth is that the overwhelming majority of unauthorized immigrants in this country are decent and honorable people who toil day and night, usually at difficult jobs in a deeply unfamiliar environment, in order to create a brighter future for the ones they love. Many of them were forced to leave behind everything—and everyone—they knew in order to reach our shores. Without them, our economy—and our nation—would grind to a halt. They operate our farms and our factories. They provide countless services that we cannot live without. And we trust them to care for our elderly parents and to look after our children.

In this sense, they are no different than the generations of immigrants who preceded them. Since this country's founding, the hard work of making America better has been carried out by intrepid individuals like them, men and women from other shores whose character, passion and talent have continuously enriched the

this nation and replenished its spirit. This is a great country—and it is a great country precisely because of people like them. We, as a community—as a *familia*—must continue to fight on their behalf. It is a good and honorable fight—and one I am proud to make.

Thank you again.