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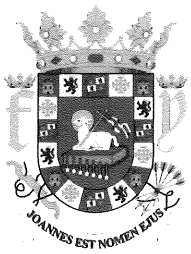

CARLOS A. ROMERO BARCELÓ
Governor of Puerto Rico
(1977-1985)

Mayor of San Juan
1969-1977
Governor of Puerto Rico
1977-1985
Senator of Puerto Rico
1986 – 1989
Resident Commissioner of Puerto Rico in Washington
1993 -2001

Testimony of Carlos Romero Barceló

114th Congress
Subcommitte on Indian, Insular and Alaska Native Affairs
Oversight hearing: "Examining procedures regarding Puerto Rico's political status and economic outlook"

June 24, 2015

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, good afternoon:

Mr. Chairman I want to thank you, on behalf of all my fellow Puerto Rican Americans who, as American citizens, demand equal rights and equal participation in the democratic process and the government of our nation with our fellow citizens in the 50 states of the union, for all your efforts and support to our longtime quest for equality.

Before we continue, I would like you to ask yourselves the following questions:

1. Do you believe in our Constitution and in our nation's republican form of government?
2. Do you believe as our Constitution declares, that, "all men are created equal", and
3. Do you believe that all U.S. citizens should have the right to vote for their President and to elect Senators and Representatives to Congress?

If you answered yes to the third question, you should support and join our efforts to enact a Bill for Admission of Puerto Rico as a state.

I have dedicated 52 years of my adult life in a quest for equality for the people of Puerto Rico. We have been disenfranchised American citizens for 98 years. We have been denied our right to participate in our nation's democracy and we have been denied any meaningful participation in our nation's government. We have also been denied the same economic opportunities which have been available to our fellow citizens in the 50 states. We are, as a matter of fact, the world's last colony with more than one million (1,000,000) inhabitants. Under our Constitution, we are a U.S. Territory, but in international geopolitical terms, we are a colony.

In spite of the fact that we have been denied equality and participation in our nation's democratic process ever since we were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917, more than

500,000 Puerto Rican Americans have served in our nation's armed forces and tens of thousands have shed their blood and lost life and limbs in defense of Democracy and in defense of our nation. Puerto Rican Americans have more than earned their right to equal participation in our nation's democratic process, as well as their right to vote for our President and to elect Senators and Representatives to Congress.

We are tired and increasingly upset to have to plead for equality; we are tired and increasingly upset to have to plead and beg for equal terms in federal grants for education of our children; we are tired of pleading and begging for equal terms in federal health care grants to provide health services to our medically indigent; we are tired of pleading and increasingly upset to have to beg for equal terms in federal grants to help families with insufficient income to support their children, and we are tired and increasingly upset at being told that we don't qualify for equal funding because we don't pay federal income taxes.

How can Congress raise the issue of our non-payment of federal income taxes when you know that we don't have the power to impose federal income taxes on income earned in Puerto Rico. Only Congress has that power. And why hasn't Congress imposed federal income taxes on income earned in Puerto Rico? Because Congress knows that if they were to impose federal income taxes on us without granting us equal voting rights and equal rights to elect Senators and Representatives to Congress, Congress would be invalidating our nation's famous "No taxation without representation" battle cry to end the colonial relationship with Great Britain.

Yes, we are tired and increasingly upset by being denied the right to vote for our President and the right to elect two Senators and the number of Members of Congress that we would be entitled to as a state. And, we are particularly upset when we see our President and our nation's Congress spending billions of dollars and sending our nation's young men and women into harm's way, to bring democracy to countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where they don't understand it, nor want it. At the same time, they have kept, and are still keeping, 3.6 million U.S. citizens, disenfranchised, discriminated against and denied equality under the laws of the nation for no less than 98 years.

It is no wonder that the United States is losing credibility and moral authority to preach democracy and to talk about strengthening democracy throughout the world. Our nation is being ridiculed for its hipocrisy in spending billions of dollars and putting its young men and women in harm's way to bring democracy to people in Iraq and Afghanistan who do not understand it nor want it, while they deny participation in the nation's democratic process to 3.6 million American citizens because they live in Puerto Rico. I have enclosed with my statement a disk containing some very insightful and satirical criticism of our nation's hipocrisy with Puerto Rican Americans made by British Comedian John Oliver. You will not only be enlightened by it, you will also enjoy it.

Yes! We must stop begging for equality and demand it loud and clear; and belligerently, if need be. It is way past the time when Congress and the President should have put an end to our disenfranchisement and to our being denied equal opportunities under the laws of our nation.

How can anyone who claims to believe in democracy stand idly by without putting an end to the discrimination and the unacceptable inequality between the 3.6 million American citizens who live in Puerto Rico and their 360 million fellow citizens in the 50 states. Whether we demand equality or not, it is the Congress and the President's duty, as leaders of the world's greatest democracy, to put an end to this inequality and denial to participate in our nation's democracy.

We have decided to ask for admission as a state. On November 2012, we held a referendum in Puerto Rico where the people were asked to vote whether they wanted to remain as a U.S. Territory or not, and 54% of the voters said no and 46% said yes. The referendum ballot had a second question which gave the voters three (3) options, to wit: Statehood, Sovereign Commonwealth, or Independence. A solid majority of 61% voted in favor of Puerto Rico being admitted as a state.

The solid majority vote for statehood in 2012 cannot be ignored. This Congress must address the issue and consider enacting a bill to provide for the admission of Puerto Rico as a state. The Bill should establish the conditions and the process, as well as the fiscal and economic arrangements that must be implemented for Puerto Rico to be admitted as a state. The plebiscite or referendum to be held would allow the American citizens who reside in Puerto Rico, the opportunity to accept or deny the offer. The ballot would be a simple Yes or No vote. All those who oppose statehood could vote No, so they cannot complain that they were not offered an option to exercise their right to vote.

Of the 37 territories admitted to the union since the thirteen (13) colonies joined to establish the United States of America, not a single one was disenfranchised for as long a period of time as we have been for 98 years. Not a single territory of the 37 admitted to the union, were deprived of equal economic opportunities and benefits for as long as we have. Not a single territory of the 37 territories which were admitted, had as many of its citizens killed or wounded in the nation's wars, as we have had in the 98 years since we became American citizens.

The awareness of the importance and of the benefits of being a state of the union has become more obvious to Puerto Rican Americans as they suffer the effects of a worsening economic depression. As they increasingly feel they no longer have reasonable opportunities to get a job or get ahead economically in the island; they are leaving Puerto Rico to look for substantially better opportunities in Florida, Texas, Georgia, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Illinois, Ohio and many other states. As a result, more and more Puerto Ricans realize that our island's economic future lies in our becoming the 51st state.

We don't want our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our grandchildren, our family and our friends to leave Puerto Rico, we want them to stay and enjoy the same opportunities available to our fellow citizens in the 50 states.

Puerto Ricans have also become more cognizant of the importance of having the right to vote for the President and to elect Senators and Representatives to Congress in order to participate in our nation's sovereignty. The value to our dignity, to our economic

development and to our self-esteem in having two (2) Senators and at least five (5) Members of Congress is much more widely understood and sought after than ever before.

That, and much more is what millions of American citizens in Puerto Rico have been denied for 98 years. The time has come, not to beg or plead, but to demand equality! The time has come for Congress and the President to stop looking for excuses and enact a Bill to admit Puerto Rico as a state, to be submitted to a vote in Puerto Rico.