

Status, Our People and Right to Vote  
by Victoria Muñoz Mendoza and Héctor Luis Acevedo

“The political status is to serve the quality of life that the Puerto Rican people want to create for themselves. The political status, we should repeat it a hundred times over and over again, is to serve those human ideals, not to deviate our people from the paths to fulfill them.

Luis Muñoz Marín

The people of Puerto Rico agonized for decades with the dilemma between statehood and independence. Our energies were diluted in these struggles and the problems of our people took a back seat. From this crisis emerged a creative agenda that recognized that our people are the top priority and not status. For decades we grew inside and out.

The Commonwealth was created without sacrificing our culture. Harmonizing the values of affirmation of our own culture and personality with American citizenship and its freedom of movement, promoting economic, educational and social development never seen or repeated in our history.

Today our people face great challenges that diminish their quality of life and their options for the future. These challenges must be overcome. The pandemic, closed schools, lack of jobs, debt, fictitious budgets and our government's inability to combat corruption. Interposing the status debate on the road to recovery does not seem prudent or correct at this point. The day will come, but it is not here yet. It will come when we overcome the pandemic crisis, the Fiscal Control Board and resume our economy of hope.

This month, two bills were filed with the United States Congress on status. One pretends to impose statehood despite our people being divided in half, to impose a status of assimilation as a federal state that has no going back. In 1995 the status struggles led the government of Puerto Rico to request, contrary to its electoral program, the elimination of Section 936, which led to the loss of more than 100,000 jobs. A good part of our current economic problems is due to this action product of status fanaticism.

Another bill, based in good faith, seeks to impose a statehood or independence dilemma, removing Commonwealth from the ballot. It's like going back to the 1930s and the struggles faced at that time when nationalists and pro-US forces fought violently against each other. It is not possible to speak of inclusion by excluding one of the two main options in our country. It is not possible to speak of self-determination and not respect the freedom of the people of Puerto Rico to choose their preferences through their constitutional right vote. One cannot speak of democracy if the rights of the Puerto Rican people are not respected. Taking away the right to vote from the Puerto Ricans that believe in the Commonwealth is an error of principle and of the practical realities of liberty.

It is our belief that Puerto Rico's priorities should be directed towards creating consensus and a common ground that allows us to address the health, education and work crisis in which we are immersed.

We need to start a dialogue so that, in due course, all options are included, respecting differences, not trying to define an adversary's preference, much less take them off the ballot. Puerto Ricans must be able to decide, without a conflict between our quality of life and its democracy. We must forge understandings to be able to dedicate our best energies to our people.

March 25, 2021 *El Nuevo Día* page 35.