



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
“Dr. Martin Luther King and Puerto Rico Statehood”
January 20, 2015

Mr. Speaker:

Yesterday, this nation—including Puerto Rico—celebrated Martin Luther King Day. It is important to pause and reflect upon Dr. King’s legacy and its relevance to the issue of Puerto Rico’s political status.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. King was the most prominent leader of the civil rights movement for racial equality in the United States. He was physically brave, leading peaceful marches and other protests in parts of the country where some government officials and residents were willing to use violence and intimidation to maintain a system of segregation and discrimination.

Dr. King was also remarkably eloquent. His speeches and writings inspired men and women who already supported the campaign for racial equality, but they also changed the hearts and minds of individuals who initially opposed the cause. He helped many Americans who were living in moral darkness to see the light.

Dr. King was motivated by a sense of urgency. In a letter written from an Alabama jail, he stated that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” But Dr. King was also strategic. Every action he took was carefully designed to advance the cause. He knew that means mattered as much as ends, and he had little patience for advocates who lacked a sense of tactics and timing.

Dr. King traveled to Puerto Rico on at least two occasions, but it does not appear that he expressed a considered opinion about the island’s political status. Nevertheless, based on Dr. King’s philosophy, it is fair to presume that he would be very troubled by the situation in Puerto Rico.

Dr. King regarded the right to vote as “sacred.” In a 1957 speech delivered in front of the Lincoln Memorial, he said: “So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind—it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact—I can only submit to the edict of others.”

Nearly 50 years after Dr. King’s death from an assassin’s bullet, the right to vote in federal and local elections is guaranteed to all American citizens, regardless of race—but *only* if they reside in a U.S. state. The 3.6 million American citizens residing in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico are denied this sacred right, unable to vote for the federal leaders who make the laws that govern every aspect of our lives. We lack the very right that Dr. King lived for, and the right he died for.

The movement that Dr. King led was a quest for equal rights and equal opportunities for African-Americans. However, the principle that lay behind the movement—and that gave it such moral power—has broader application. It is the belief that there is only one category of American citizenship, not a first-class citizenship for some and a second-class citizenship for others. Every

day that Puerto Rico remains a territory, an undemocratic and undignified status, this principle is violated.

Dr. King taught us that achieving equality requires hard, determined, relentless work. It requires leaders who are both passionate and strategic, just as Dr. King was. But, above all, it requires thousands upon thousands of ordinary men and women to unite around a principle—the principle of equality—and to fight for it until it is attained. Dr. King’s life is a testament to the fundamental truth that there is no force on earth strong enough to stop a righteous cause pursued by righteous means. Our struggle to obtain equal rights and equal opportunities for the U.S. citizens of Puerto Rico is a struggle for justice and, with tireless effort, we will prevail.

Thank you.