



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Remarks as Prepared For Delivery
Puerto Rico Statehood Students Association (PRSSA)
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Good evening and *bienvenidos a todos*. I want to thank the organizers of tonight's event for inviting me to speak. And I want to thank all of you for attending on a Friday night, when I am sure you could be out having fun. As some of you may recall, I gave a speech to the George Washington University chapter of the Puerto Rico Statehood Students Association back in November 2010, and I am honored to be back at GW, where I attended law school—many, many years ago!

I want to start by extending my personal gratitude to all of you. I know you are fighting hard to advance the cause of statehood for Puerto Rico. Your weapons in this battle are your powers of advocacy, your sense of justice, and your desire to achieve equal treatment for the people of our beloved Island. This is an honorable cause, one worthy of your time and energy, and so I commend each of you.

Before I open the floor for questions and answers, I will make some remarks that cover three areas. First, I think it is important to articulate with precision why I oppose the current status and support statehood for Puerto Rico. Second, I will explain the historic importance of the November 6th plebiscite. Finally, I will discuss the steps we are taking to ensure that the President and Congress respond appropriately to the plebiscite results, and how you can help.

Why I Oppose the Current Status and Support Statehood

I should note at the outset that, while you and I may believe that the moral and pragmatic case for statehood is self-evident, not everyone else agrees. To convert as many people as possible to our point of view, we need to make clear, coherent and evidence-based arguments. We need to make them with passion, to be sure, but also with respect and patience.

So, why do I oppose the current status? Because it deprives the people of Puerto Rico of the two most important rights in a democracy. Specifically, it denies us the right to choose the leaders who make our national laws, which govern nearly every aspect of our daily lives. We cannot vote for president, U.S. senators, and voting representatives in the U.S. House. In the 21st

century, this is shocking. Moreover, the current status denies us the right to equal treatment under our national laws. The federal programs that treat Puerto Rico worse than our fellow citizens in the states are too numerous to list, but include nearly every key safety-net program.

The current status also harms us in other—less tangible but equally important—ways. Consider the problem of drug-related violence, one of the most serious challenges that Puerto Rico faces. Since becoming Resident Commissioner, I have been pushing the federal government to allocate more law enforcement resources to Puerto Rico, just as the federal government has done along the Southwest border with Mexico and in high-crime cities like Oakland, Detroit, and Philadelphia. These efforts have finally begun to bear fruit. The Department of Homeland Security has informed me that it will surge additional personnel and assets to Puerto Rico over the coming months, which is an important step in the right direction.

But let's be honest. If the appalling violence we have been experiencing in Puerto Rico were taking place in any state, the response from the federal government would be immediate, it would be strong, and it would continue until the problem was alleviated. Even for the most well-intentioned federal officials, the territories are too often an afterthought.

The truth of the matter is that residents of Puerto Rico have been U.S. citizens—and U.S. soldiers—since 1917, but our citizenship is second class. So when I hear certain politicians in Puerto Rico argue that, under the current status, we somehow have the best of both worlds—I want to invite them to spend a day in my shoes. I want them to experience what it is like to have to fight tooth-and-nail to ensure that Puerto Rico is not excluded from a job-creation or health-care bill that automatically includes the states. I want them to experience how it feels to watch as 435 of my colleagues, from Maine to California, cast their votes on a bill that affects life in Puerto Rico, while I can only sit there and watch.

It is also crystal clear from the evidence that the current status hurts our economy and, therefore, our quality of life. Let me give two quick examples. Since at least the 1970s, when the federal government began collecting statistics, Puerto Rico's unemployment rate has always been significantly higher than every state. The Island's unemployment rate has averaged 15-and-a-half percent, while the U.S. national unemployment rate has averaged under 6-and-a-half percent.

Now consider per capita gross national product. Since at least 1970, Puerto Rico's per capita GNP has been about one-third of per capita GNP in the United States. Even the poorest states have average household incomes that are far higher than Puerto Rico's.

This evidence points to a single conclusion. In the last 40 years, we have had governments in San Juan led by both the PNP and the PDP. In Washington, the executive and legislative

branches have been controlled by both Democrats and Republicans. Countless measures designed to improve Puerto Rico's economy have been enacted at the local and federal level. And yet, through all of these political and policy changes, our economic position—relative to the states—has not improved. It is beyond dispute that the economic problems in Puerto Rico are structural and chronic, not cyclical and temporary.

Does anyone think Puerto Rico's economic performance is lagging because our people and political leaders are not as capable or hard-working as their counterparts in, say, Mississippi or Montana? To the contrary, I think our Island is home to exceptionally bright and diligent people. The young, talented Puerto Ricans sitting in this room prove my point. We need to understand that we have not failed as individuals; our political system has failed us.

If you need additional evidence, consider that Puerto Rico is rapidly losing population, nearly all through migration to the states. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of our people have felt compelled to seek a better future in Florida, Connecticut, Texas and other states. Every day, residents of Puerto Rico cast a symbolic vote against the current status and for statehood by boarding an airplane and leaving behind the Island they love.

That is my case against the current status. Now let me briefly explain why I believe statehood, rather than independence or free association, is the right and logical next step for Puerto Rico.

Independence and free association are two sides of the same coin, and that coin is nationhood. Both are dignified options that would provide Puerto Rico with full self-government at the national level. But we need to be very clear about what these status options could mean for quality of life on the Island.

Independence entails breaking all of the strong economic, political and social bonds that have formed between Puerto Rico and the United States over the past 115 years, a prospect the overwhelming majority of our people reject.

Likewise, free association would substantially weaken the close ties that have been forged—in both peace and war—between Puerto Rico and the United States. Under free association, Puerto Rico would become a sovereign nation, but would have an agreement with the U.S. that sets forth the terms of the relationship between the two nations and that could be terminated by either party at any point. The U.S. currently has such agreements with three small nations in the Pacific. These countries receive assistance under certain federal programs, but do not receive assistance under critical programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. Residents of these nations—unlike residents of Puerto Rico—are not American citizens.

While independence would sever our union with the United States, and free association would weaken our union, statehood would perfect our union. Statehood would deliver to Puerto Rico what all free people deserve: full voting rights, full self-government, and full equality under the law. At the same time, statehood would strengthen our economy and improve our quality of life, as the most recent examples of Alaska and Hawaii demonstrate.

Parenthetically, I want to address perhaps the most common argument against statehood, which is that Puerto Rico's culture would be compromised. I could not disagree more. Our history, our traditions, our language, our faith, our food, our arts, our music, our love of family, and our embrace of life—these things are the very essence of what it means to be Puerto Rican. Nothing—certainly not equal treatment under statehood—could ever diminish their role in our lives. Our culture is simply too powerful and too intrinsic a part of who we are.

The Historic Importance of the November 2012 Plebiscite

Now, despite the inherent defects of the current status and the clear moral and practical benefits of statehood, the reality is that, prior to the November 6th plebiscite, critics of statehood could plausibly argue that Island residents had never expressed a clear desire to end territory status and become a state. The November 6th plebiscite was historic because statehood opponents can no longer make this argument—at least not with any credibility.

As you know, the ballot had two questions. In the first question, voters were asked whether they want Puerto Rico to remain a territory. Nearly 1.8 million people answered, which is three-quarters of all registered voters on the island. 54 percent—a clear majority—said they did not want the current status to continue, while 46 percent said they did.

The second question in the referendum asked voters to express their preference among the valid alternatives to the current status. Of the nearly 1.4 million people who chose an option, 61 percent voted for statehood. Of critical importance, the number of votes for statehood on the second question exceeded the number of votes for the current status on the first question. For the first time ever, more people in Puerto Rico want to be a state than to continue as a territory. No amount of spin, attempted damage control, or flimsy arguments about blank ballots on the part of defenders of the status quo can change this fundamental fact.

Next Steps—and How You Can Help

Finally, let me discuss where we go from here—and how you can help. Since the referendum, I have taken a number of steps to ensure that the President and Congress will respect the results of the democratic process. I have written letters and op-eds, given speeches and interviews in the national media, and met with senior White House officials and leaders in the Senate and the House. It should come as no surprise to you that many of my efforts are being conducted outside of the public eye. The message I have delivered is simple: although there are a number of

possible steps that the federal government can take to fulfill its moral responsibility to respond to the referendum, what is not an option is inaction.

In the near future, I intend to introduce federal legislation on this issue. This legislation will be developed in close consultation with—and based on the recommendation of—a status commission that includes two former governors, key legislators, and civic leaders who support statehood for Puerto Rico. I have no doubt that PDP politicians in San Juan will attempt to obstruct progress on this issue, just as they have always done. But I am confident that, in the long run, they will not succeed—because in a democracy the will of the people ultimately prevails.

So what can you do? Well, have you ever heard the Woody Allen quote: “Ninety percent of life is just showing up”? It’s true. By joining PRSSA and attending tonight, you have taken the first and most important step—because you have proven that you care and that you are committed to the cause.

I also encourage you to show up at a rally we are holding tomorrow morning outside the White House, where we will be signing a letter to President Obama. This is the first trickle in what I expect will become a flood of activity in support of democracy and equality and against second-class citizenship and government without the consent of the governed.

More generally, I hope you will talk to and educate your peers, wherever they are from, and whatever their political views. Because this is not a Democrat cause, or a Republican cause. It is not a liberal issue, or a conservative issue. It transcends politics and political labels. It is about right and wrong.

Beyond that, do whatever you can to raise awareness. I believe many Americans want to learn more about Puerto Rico and its current relationship with the United States. And I think we have many natural allies who, once they become engaged on the issue, will respect our cause and join our movement.

So thank you all—and I am happy to answer your questions.