

A Letter to Party Leaders in Puerto Rico

From English Language Advocates' chairman

by **Leo Sorensen**

[On December 7, 1998, Chairman Leo Sorensen of English Language Advocates (ELA) addressed a letter to party leaders Hon. Pedro Rosello, Governor of the New Progressive Party; Hon. Anibel Acevedo Vilá, President of the Popular Democratic Party; Hon. Ruben Berrios, Senator of the Puerto Rican Independence Party; and Hon. Luis Vega Ramos, Chairman of the Coordinadora Puertorriqueña.]

Gentlemen:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Board of Directors and the fifty thousand supporters of English Language Advocates (ELA), a national non-profit organization dedicated to the defense of English as the official language of the United States.

Several representatives of ELA, myself included, have just returned from Puerto Rico where we spent several days observing the plebiscite campaign and meeting with advocates for the various status options offered to the voters on December 13.

We are deeply concerned about the campaign of misinformation that is being conducted by the advocates of Statehood for Puerto Rico, whose advertising boldly and incorrectly assures the voters that the island can become a 51st State without any changes in its language and cultural policies. THAT ASSERTION IS WRONG. It is clearly meant to create the illusion that Puerto Ricans can join the Union of States without having to accept the primacy of English in their public life, nor give up some of their cherished symbols of independence from the American nation.

We feel it is our duty to inform our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico that this promise is false. To cast an informed ballot, voters in Puerto Rico should consider these facts:

- There can be no Spanish-speaking State of Puerto

Rico. Statehood implies that English will be the language of state and local governments and of all their branches and subdivisions. English will be the primary language of Puerto Rican schools.

- The State of Puerto Rico will have no separate representation in the Olympics, in international beauty competitions, in the United Nations or any other international body. These functions are the sole prerogative of the United States.
- The people of the United States, through their representatives in the Congress, will withhold membership in the Union of States from any State insisting on language separatism. Mindful of the example of Quebec, mainstream America will defend its traditional language, English, against the dangers inherent in a Spanish-speaking State within the Union.
- There is no trial membership in the United States. The Union is indivisible. Once a State, Puerto Rico can never aspire to any other status.

The movement to defend English against the implantation of rival languages continues to gain momentum and is determined to use its growing strength to bar the entry of Puerto Rico as a quasi-autonomous Spanish-speaking nation within the Union of States.

In view of the long and largely beneficial association between the people of the United States and the people of Puerto Rico, it may be best to avoid the assured embarrassment of Congressional refusal and await a more propitious time — when English fluency has become the rule rather than the exception in Puerto Rico — for formally seeking membership in the Union of States.

(s) LEO SORENSEN, Chairman
English Language Advocates

Puerto Rico's Future

Statehood advocates will continue to push that option, so vigilance is called for

by Gerda Bikales

On December 13, 1998, voters in Puerto Rico went to the polls to choose the type of relationship they want with the United States, an issue that has monopolized island politics for more than eighty years. For the second time in five years Puerto Ricans were asked to choose between applying to become our country's 51st state, maintaining their current commonwealth status (in effect since 1952), or seeking total independence from the United States.

When the votes were all counted, retaining the status quo of commonwealth was once again the winner. Yet, in early December, just days before the plebiscite, polls had indicated a decided voter preference for statehood. What had happened to prove the prognosticators wrong?

It is easy enough to explain the strong pro-statehood sentiments that seemed to prevail as the plebiscite approached. The statehood party is in control of the governor's mansion and the legislature, and it had used its political muscle to define "commonwealth" in the ballot description as an abject form of colonial subjugation, thereby causing the commonwealth party to bolt from that choice in favor of a hastily created alternative, "none of the above." Statehood advocates played on the fears of Puerto Ricans that their valuable American citizenship, granted by Congress in 1917, may be revoked any time unless they act quickly to become a state.

Having allocated itself a very generous budget for lobbying in Washington and for saturation media advertising in Puerto Rico, the statehood party bombarded television viewers with images of an

endless stream of dollars flowing from the United States to the island, as soon as it joined the Union. Other advertising repeated assurances that no cultural and linguistic adjustments would be expected of Puerto Ricans — the 51st state would retain its Latin American character and its traditional Spanish language undiminished. Why, then, would anyone not vote for the ultimate free lunch?

Under the leadership of chairman Leo Sorensen, English Language Advocates, a national public interest organization, stepped into this dense fog of preposterous false promises and carefully crafted public misconceptions. In the week before the plebiscite Sorensen, accompanied by staffer Phillips Hinch and myself, traveled to Puerto Rico to bring a very different message to the public. The full acceptance of English, they insisted, is a non-negotiable prerequisite for joining the Union of States. Because the United States categorically refuses to become a bilingual nation, a candidate for statehood insisting on conducting its affairs in a language other than English will be vigorously opposed by mainstream America and inevitably rejected by its elected representatives in the Congress.

In a series of meetings with highly placed leaders of all factions and with representatives of the press, the ELA team repeated this message forcefully. Its ads, placed in the leading English- and Spanish-language newspapers, were picked up by the media and became the subject of extensive news coverage and commentary in the critical weekend before the vote.

The plebiscite had defied predictions. Despite political manipulations that had divided the commonwealth vote into "commonwealth," "free association" (a form of enhanced commonwealth status), and "none of the above," the "statehood" option mustered only 46.5 percent. It won neither a

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