

**SO SUNNY AN ISLAND,
SO CLOUDED A VIEW:
SNAPSHOTS OF PUERTO
RICAN PUBLIC OPINION**

By Lawrence Kaagan

The governor of Puerto Rico surprised voters—and many of his own aides—by announcing in his 1989 inaugural address that he would seek to hold a plebiscite on the island in 1991. The vote, he said, was to determine once and for all what relationship Puerto Ricans sought with the United States: statehood, independence, or a continuation of commonwealth status.

Part of the surprise was that Governor Rafael Hernandez Colon, as head of Puerto Rico's Popular Democratic Party, is nominally the standard-bearer for the status quo; his political career has been a history of strategies to stave off statehood and minimize the appeals of independence. And now, after nearly two years of complex partisan bickering among the three major political parties in San Juan, and a failure to vote on the necessary enabling legislation by the two parties in Washington, there will probably be no plebiscite this year. With gubernatorial elections already scheduled, 1992 is too crowded to hold the vote. Still, the question remains: in an era when the UN scans the horizon to rid the world of its last remaining "colonial" structures, what do the people of Puerto Rico want?

No Status, No Quo

Legal scholars and politicians dispute whether a simple majority (50% plus one) or some form of "super-majority" (perhaps 60% or more) would be necessary for formal Puerto Rican application for statehood (or any other modification of status). But, polls have shown clearly, the Puerto Rican people have long been unable to decide on their permanent relationship to the United States. *None* of the status options has found majority support among Puerto Rican voters.

In surveys conducted for El Nuevo Dia, Puerto Rico's leading newspaper, in January and February of this year, 66% of registered voters favored moving ahead with a plebiscite vote. Though this figure was down from the 73% who sought "closure" in an October 1990 survey, there was still solid support for bringing the status matter to a head. But surveys show voters quite evenly split between statehood and commonwealth slid past each other for the second time since February of 1988, with these two options trading places, in terms of the lead, over time. In February 1989, just weeks after the Governor's surprise call for a plebiscite, his preferred choice, retention of

commonwealth, led in the polls by 45% to 37%. By January of 1990, though, there was a margin for statehood, and it seemed a trend might be brewing. But in January and February 1991, El Nuevo Dia found a hair's-breadth lead for commonwealth (Table 1).

The January poll revealed something else that may be at least as troubling in Washington it is as frustrating in San Juan. Not only isn't there majority support for any of the three status options, only 45% of Puerto Rican voters thinks the Congress favors allowing Puerto Ricans to make up their own minds about political status; 34% say that Congress actually opposes this self-determination.

Status and Language

Now, a new wrinkle has been added to the old debate over status. The island is first and foremost an Hispanic society, and the daily life of almost everyone (and everything but tourism, high commerce and the Federal courts) is conducted in Spanish. But since 1902, under various laws and constitutional provisions, English has been enshrined in Puerto Rico as a "co-official" tongue. No longer. In order to devise a "poison pill" which would make an application for statehood distasteful to the US Congress, the pro-commonwealth party has pushed through the legislature and the Governor has signed a law making Spanish the sole "official" language.

It's important to note that Puerto Ricans were not given a chance to vote on this change—perhaps because they opposed it so adamantly in recent polls. In the October 1990 survey for El Nuevo Dia, voters rejected calls for making Spanish the sole official language by a whopping three to one margin. Pro-commonwealth voters, pondering a threat to the complex economic ties to the US, scorned the idea, by 72%-28%. Even among supporters of independence, often the most outspoken defenders of the "purity" of Puerto Rican culture against US influence, 55% opposed the Spanish-only legislation.

The Other Agenda

The fact of the matter is that Puerto Ricans have other, more immediate things on their minds than political status and language. Those issues, which have gotten tangled up in perennially rancorous local politics, are viewed as much less important than an unemployment rate hovering near 17%, a crime problem which includes armed robbers intercepting cars at highway intersections, and plans to privatize many of the island's government-owned utilities and public services.

On this last issue, Puerto Ricans have a love/hate relationship with their utilities: They protest poor service, wasted resources, and bureaucracy, but they are quite

Puerto Rico/Kaagan/continued

attached to the idea that these entities remain publicly owned. Governor Hernandez Colon has announced plans to sell off the Puerto Rican Telephone Company, along with the Bus Authority, the Water Resources Authority, and the Energy Authority. This strategy appears driven less by free-market ideology and more by the pressing needs of the Puerto Rican Treasury. In any case, voters don't like the idea of selling off their patrimony for a short-term "fix" of the island's finances. The government is moving ahead with negotiations to sell the telephone utility just the same.

There are two sources of opposition. One is something akin to national pride in a public infrastructure, the other more practical. While a slim 32% plurality voters think that if the PRTC is operated as a private company the quality of service would improve (29% say it would stay the same), a big majority fear that their phone bills would rise immediately after privatization.

Jobs, Taxes, and Political Status

The size and role of the public sector is only one debate that Puerto Ricans will be drawn into as they

ponder their future. Between 25% and 30% of the workforce draws a paycheck from government. An even higher percentage work for big US corporations who built manufacturing facilities on the island under the auspices of "Section 936" of the IRS Code. This provision, written specifically to enhance the commonwealth's economic development, allows American companies to repatriate a substantial portion of their island-generated profit tax-free. How that loophole, and those jobs, would fare in any revision of Puerto Rico's political relationship to the United States, is a major issue.

More than one observer has looked north while pondering south, wondering if Puerto Rico contains the ingredients to become "America's Quebec." Riven by feuds over language, wary of dominance by "Anglo" culture while benefitting hugely from it, and ensnared in fractious domestic politics that colors everything, the "shining star of the Caribbean" is still far from a popular consensus on what flag it wants to fly.

Lawrence Kaagan is president of Kaagan Research Associates and, since 1983, has conducted polls for El Nuevo Dia

Table 1

Expected Vote in Status Plebiscite

Question: If there is a plebiscite vote, for which of these alternatives would you vote?

| Likely to Vote For: | 1/91 | 10/90 | 1/90 | 9/89 | 2/89 |
|--|------|-------|------|------|------|
| ELA (Pro-Commonwealth) | 41% | 34% | 36% | 37% | 45% |
| Statehood | 39 | 41 | 43 | 41 | 35 |
| Independence | 5 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| Don't know/Not sure/ Would not vote | 11 | 14 | 9 | 12 | 11 |
| Refused | 4 | 5 | 7 | 6 | 4 |

Source: Surveys for El Nuevo Dia conducted by Kaagan Research Associates (New York), with field work conducted by Stanford Klapper Associates (San Juan). Surveys are conducted with an Island-wide sample of 1,000 eligible voters, conducted in-home.