

**Statement of Rep. Nydia M. Velázquez**  
**U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources**  
**Full Committee Hearing on H.R. 2499**  
**June 24, 2009**

I appreciate the opportunity to offer my views on this latest effort to discuss the future of Puerto Rico, *H.R. 2499, The Puerto Rico Democracy Act of 2009*, and to clarify what is truly at stake here.

If this was not such an important issue for eight million Puerto Ricans, I would say that this debate is worthy of a Shakespearean line such as, “Once more unto the breach, dear friends.” One would think that since Congress has been talking about Puerto Rico since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this body would have found the proper way to finish this debate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unfortunately, it seems we have not.

I could have begun my statement by stating my opposition to H.R. 2499 because of previous determinations that this approach is unfair to the people of Puerto Rico. I could have further told you that as of today, none of the three members of Puerto Rican descent with constituencies in New York City and Chicago support this bill. And, lastly, I could have reminded members that previous legislative efforts that were deemed biased or un-inclusive have never succeeded.

However, for today’s hearing, these arguments may not be enough to sway well-intentioned people to think calmly about what we are debating today: Puerto Rico and its people. We are not debating a mere vote. This debate is about whether the people of Puerto Rico are ready to join us as a full partner of this Union and what sort of partner we want. It is about allowing them to decide whether or not to go on their own and what that would mean to every Puerto Rican. It is also a debate about what other options may be worthy of consideration. Whatever decision is made by them, it must be one that is made knowingly and willingly. This is essential, for any status-changing decision will not be an easy one. That decision must be taken with a clear understanding of the consequences and with the determined commitment to carry it forward.

A bill drafted without consensus will always be under suspicion by a large segment of the population in Puerto Rico and, therefore, lack legitimacy. For Congress to push forward such an initiative ignores the historic words and the lessons from Lincoln’s time, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” How do we expect to find a solution to this Puerto Rico issue if we give merit to proposals that promote and foment mistrusts and divisions?

The issue here that makes this legislation unacceptable was present in its previous incarnations in the 104th, 105th, 109th & 110th Congresses – the process. The process promoted by those bills has been perceived to be skewed in one form or another. It is now time to break this cycle. Thomas Paine once wrote, “A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right.” This bill is not right and we should begin investing Congress’ time in doing what is right.

We can not sanction this insistence in keeping a people blinded to facts, deaf to analysis and muted from expressing their opinions on what is being bargained, supposedly on their behalf. It is time to try a new approach to resolve this issue in a manner that does not allow one side to shut other positions out of the process. Lack of consensus equals lack of legitimacy.

I have advocated that a Constitutional Convention is an appropriate option, but it is not the only open process and I believe there can be other options that have not been discussed. However, any fair and transparent process must allow for hearings to be conducted in Puerto Rico and include the Puerto Rican community in the States in the self-determination process. It is my deepest conviction that a true democratic path to self-determination for the people of Puerto Rico must be forged first by Puerto Ricans; and it is up to them to decide what their options are for the future.

President Obama fully understands the difficulty of this issue and has indicated his willingness to be engaged. This President deserves to have the opportunity to take a look at this issue and formulate proposals on how to move forward. I suggest that this Committee afford the President the opportunity to act and seek the expertise of this committee as well as other stakeholders. I look forward to working with the Obama Administration and the Committee in providing the people of Puerto Rico with an approach that guarantees a true expression of their wishes. Thank you.