



PUERTO RICO FORWARD

Episode 24: Thank you for your time, thank you for listening, ¡Y QUE VIVA PUERTO RICO!

TRANSCRIPT

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Today's episode of PRF is a special one because it will be my last. Yes my friends, as I announced in the latest installment of the *PRF Review*, I've decided that the time has come to continue my fight for Puerto Rico (hereinafter PR) through other avenues. Without a doubt, hosting and producing PRF has not only been a blessing, but is one of the most fulfilling projects I've ever had the pleasure of being a part of. I'm fully aware that the opportunity to address the PR issue head-on and without any secondary agenda is unfortunately something of a novelty. Although the PR issue is over a century old, it has suffered the chill of Congress' cold shoulder term after term for decades and decades. One of the reasons this is so is because people do not talk about PR's colonial problem. That's why it's important to encourage the creation and success of content that sheds light on the issue. That said, I acknowledge that talking about PR's political and legal bondage is not appealing to everyone, especially given the fact that for many, it entails an exercise of introspection that requires us to face our ignorance and prejudice on the subject. But more often than not, pain and discomfort are a part of the healing process; and if we want to embody the values of equality and freedom, we need to put in the work and solve this important issue.

Now, make no mistake; there will be push-back. The archipelago's colonial reality is an indictment of American exceptionalism and the ideal of democracy that is so passionately ingrained in the national narrative. The US's role as colonial owner and master runs contrary to the widely accepted notion that the US's darkest times of state-sponsored discrimination are behind it. This is not an easy or comforting idea for any of the parties involved. From the point of view of a Boricua, there is no joy in seeing oneself as the object of oppression and exploitation. On the other hand, I'm sure that for someone from the US it isn't comforting to accept that their nation has fostered and prolonged a colonial policy. But if we want to be agents of change and advocates of the archipelago's well-being, we must make it our mission to see the day that Congress approves legislation that addresses and finally corrects the fundamental injustice that has plagued the people of PR for over 120 years through the eradication of colonialism; no matter the cost.

Of course, as you know, Congress is not the only object of our efforts. People have to be a part of our plan. This task is not easy since it often entails coaching people out of their comfort zones. Here in the archipelago, and within the diaspora, many Puerto Ricans have unfortunately adopted ideological stances that have been informed and framed by 120 years of colonial dependency. Changing people's minds about how they view their nation is no small task. For as long as its history has been recorded, PR has been a colony of another nation. This has had a deep impact in how people visualize PR's future by making it really hard to accept their roles as agents of change in the fight to free the archipelago from the grips of colonial exploitation. To be clear, it's not that people don't see the use in solving PR's colonial problem, but rather that most think they have no part in doing so, or worst yet, that they **CAN'T** do anything that will have an impact. This, perhaps more than anything else, is the main reason for colonialism's persistent presence in PR; and that's why it's so imperative to raise awareness of the issue.

Having the courage to step out of the sidelines and into the arena of political action is something that becomes far more possible if we feel familiar and comfortable with the subject we're dealing with. That's why it's imperative that we adopt a research focused mentality and always maintain a critical mindset when it comes to choosing adequate and well versed sources of information.

The most important part of any social movement is AWARENESS. Making sure people are aware of what's going on is a necessary part of addressing it. It might seem obvious, but in practice awareness is often taken for granted. Anyone familiar with the PR issue can easily identify the fundamental injustice that its political status imposes. It's not hard to build an argument against colonialism; as a matter of fact, it's easy. However, the hard part is making people aware of their own role in the perpetuation of it.

You see, it might not be clear at first, but your actions can directly influence PR's colonial condition; whether it be to end it or prolong it. One context in which this truth lies in plain sight is at the ballot box. How many times have you knowingly voted for a candidate in federal elections that is fully aware of PR's political and legal situation? I bet that for most of you, the answer to this question is "**NONE**". If this is true, then we must change our patterns and begin to question every candidate's view of the PR issue. Why? Simple: lawmakers do not feel accountable for their ignorance of the subject; and where there is no accountability, there is no action. Ask yourself: why would any lawmaker go through the trouble of trying to pass legislation on a subject that is not perceived to be of interest or importance? Of course, there is always the possibility of an outlying Congressperson that genuinely wants to tackle important issues no matter how unrewarding their pursuit, but one cannot wait for myth to become reality.

As we've discussed many times on this program, the people of PR do not have access to the federal ballot box. Despite the fact we've been US citizens since 1917, we cannot take

part in electing any of the voting members of Congress nor do we have a say in who our Commander-in-Chief is. The practical result of this is that the residents of PR are disenfranchised and marginalized from the US's political process. Not having a role in US elections has served as the underlying reason behind Capital Hill's long tradition of neglect and ignorance regarding the PR issue.

So what's the game plan? What do we need to do to turn the tide and finally have the archipelago's colonial reality become an inescapable issue in US politics? We bring the PR issue forward; into the political limelight. We fight, demand and persist in including PR's intolerable colonial condition in every debate, every discussion, and every agenda. We do not settle for a few passing phases nor do we applaud the occasional lip-service. We must demand a constant and consistent stream of attention on this issue. 120 years in the dark is long enough.

Now, although the PR issue is complex, from a general point of view the objective is clear: to raise awareness about the archipelago's colonial condition so it may be eliminated. However, in order to stand a chance at accomplishing what we propose, we need to have a clear and executable plan. If we do not carve out a clear path of strategy, we risk fizzling out due to lack of direction and measurable progress. That's why I believe it's necessary to focus on one particular issue within PR's colonial struggle; an issue that I consider will help drive the conversation about PR within a relatable context for the US voting population. The proper issue to place our efforts behind, in my opinion, is the voting issue. But before I get into the specifics of this issue, there's a few things that must be cleared up.

First off, PR resident's inability to vote in federal elections is a call-to-action that is usually carried by the pro statehood movement, i.e., those who believe PR should enter into the US union as the 51st state. This might be true, but more importantly, it's also irrelevant. It doesn't matter that one of the arguments highlighting the archipelago's discriminatory treatment is commonly related with one group in particular. What matters is that it touches a nerve in the US electorate, in turn making the issue a relevant one that the US's political class would have to develop an opinion on. You see, the initial objective of those who want to raise awareness about the PR issue cannot be to attain a certain political status but rather make PR's colonial condition relevant within the US political system. This difference is **CRUCIAL**.

Attempting to advocate for a certain status option while at the same time try to raise awareness of PR's colonial reality is to offer a solution before revealing the problem; essentially putting the cart before the horse. We must first reach a sufficient level of awareness of the PR issue before it can be considered to have acquired the condition of political relevance. Once this critical mass is attained, then it would be appropriate to advocate for a particular political status option.

One valid question you might ask me if we talking face-to-face is *why I think the "voting issue" would touch a nerve within the US's electorate?* The answer lies in the US's

self-affirmed identity as a power-house of democracy. As part of its narrative of exceptionalism, the US's cultural identity is usually tied to the exaltation of the "individual" and its representation in government. The importance of the individual is so strong within the US identity that it is used by both opposites of the political ideology spectrum: the left and the right. Whether it be regarding taxation policy or healthcare coverage, both ideological currents resort to individualistic arguments in order to make their case to the masses. This is no coincidence.

Once we understand that the individual is the most important figure in the US's cultural identity, it's inevitable to conclude that it must form part of our strategy for freeing PR. The practical result of this logic is that we must identify the subject within the PR issue that resonates the most with the individual. I argue that the issue of voting within the confines of a colonial status offers a simple and accessible pathway that connects the PR issue and individualism. This connection is very much needed because it makes the PR issue relevant for those who otherwise have no "skin in the game"; and that's vital my friends.

In order to avoid the voting question from being side stepped, the issue must be framed in the right way. For example, Instead of simply questioning whether or not a particular candidate is in favor or against recognizing PR's residents the right to vote, one could accompany this question with a time frame. By bringing these two considerations together, we could ask a candidate *whether or not they would present legislation within the first one hundred days of their term that would allow for PR's residents to vote in the next presidential elections*. By framing the issue within the context of specific actions, we drive accountability. The person addressing this question would have to adopt a specific stance that could later be recalled.

Solving PR's colonial problem will entail an upfront battle against multiple economic players that have built and supported their interests on PR's legal elasticity. If we adopt for a moment their mentality we'll realize that being able to lobby Congress to treat the archipelago as a state in some laws and as a foreign country in others, depending on which is more profitable, is a highly useful form of exploitation. As a result, it is to be expected that there will be precise and focused efforts to derail whatever movement might emerge to free PR from its colonial chains. In order for any anti-colonial movement to have a chance at changing PR's current status, an alliance must be built between three distinct groups: PR's residents, PR's diaspora and the US electorate. Each one of these groups will ultimately play an important role in freeing PR from colonial bondage. Let us examine why I think this is so.

We begin with PR's residents, the people who live and breathe the consequences of the archipelago's colonial condition. This group must be the basis of any policy developed regarding the PR issue. Also, it must be stated that the fact that this group has been legally shut out of the US's political process is the most persuasive evidence in the efforts to raise awareness of the archipelago's colonial injustice. That said, it's vital to keep in mind how

easily this group can become a monolith; which has unfortunately become a tendency in both the left and right of the political spectrum. In order to prevent this from happening in the anti-colonial movement, there must be a conscious effort through action to insert the archipelago into the decision-making process. After all, any change to the archipelago's legal relationship with the US must be to the benefit of the people of PR.

Another important group to this strategy is PR's diaspora. To be clear, when we use the term "diaspora", we are referring to people whose nationality is Puerto Rican, but reside in one of the fifty states of the US. In other words, we're talking about PR's *stateside* diaspora. This group would have perhaps the most direct role in the success or failure of this particular anti-colonial strategy. This is true for two reasons. First, Puerto Ricans that reside in a state do in fact have access to the federal ballot box. This means that they have the ability to directly influence Congress' composition, thus altering its agenda and policy. The second is perhaps the most important: it is rational to expect that, given their personal connection to the archipelago, this group will have a pre-established interest in addressing PR's colonial status. This combination of factors without a doubt yields a huge amount of potential in regards to having a direct impact on the PR issue.

Finally, the last group that plays an important role in the strategy we've chosen is the US electorate. This specific segment of the US polity requires the most amount of work, but I believe it to be well worth it because if we are able to capture this group's support, PR's case will gain a great amount of support and momentum. The main challenge in engaging this group is drawing from them an interest in the PR issue. Doing this will be no easy task, but as we stated earlier, I believe the voting issue would be enough of a trigger point to possibly elicit a strong reaction. However, triggering a reaction from this group is not as important as engaging it. If we do not actively engage and challenge the US electorate's viewpoints on the PR issue, we won't go any further than we are currently.

Engaging members of the US electorate is an act that is best considered within a personal context. Each one of you listening to this program has a political ideology. It does not matter if you're a conservative or liberal, the point is that you support some general policies while rejecting others; all in the pursuit of shaping your environment to conform to your ideals. Now ask yourself: what's your view on the PR issue? Or more specifically, do you think the archipelago's residents should have a right to vote in the next federal elections? These questions invite us to reflect further: would you support allowing the entire population of a non-state to vote for the US president? What if you consider that independence were the best route for solving PR's status problem; would you still support extending federal election to the residents of PR? On the other hand, why don't you support advocating for eliminating the archipelago's disenfranchisement? Do you think it would impair PR's possibility of becoming an independent country? Once we've done this, then we can consider if our view of PR's future is in line or contradicts our ideology. By going through this process, we can better

understand our own viewpoints and evaluate them; making us far more capable at being effective proponents of PR's well-being.

Once we're able to evaluate ourselves and determine our own stance on the issue, we can turn towards our peers and inquire on their own views. As a matter of fact, if we play our cards right, we could try to position the PR issue as an important and relevant subject in the formation of people's political ideals. After all, it isn't uncommon for certain subjects to be regarded as *litmus tests* that help us categorize people into different world views. Now some people might not like the idea of fitting peoples opinions into predetermined classifications, but it's part of the current political culture. Even if we don't openly admit it, each time we hear someone's opinion regarding an important issue, we'll end up placing them in a particular political camp; but I digress. Pushing for the PR issue to be one of those important issues is another way we can drive attention to it.

You see, if we're successful at raising awareness about the PR issue, we'll then be able to position it as an important subject within the political landscape, eventually making it a defining issue that would have to be discussed. That said, for all our good intentions and hard work, there is no guarantee that a specific strategy will yield the expected results. This is especially true when we consider all the variables involved in navigating local political circles. Different counties, towns, and cities have different political tendencies due to their varying demographics. Although I'm suggesting focusing on the issue of extending voter rights to PR, this might not be the best strategy for you as a PR advocate in your area. Maybe you'd be better off touching on racial issues, or worker's rights, or any other issue that is highly relevant where you live. Whatever it is, find a subject that resonates with your community and try to approach it from the perspective of the PR issue.

Before I bring today's episode to an end, I wanted to highlight how important it is that each one of us keeps in mind how important our role is in the success or failure in our efforts on the PR issue. If hosting and producing this show in the past two years has showed me anything it's that there is no such thing as "wasted efforts" when it comes to the PR issue. Each and every time we do something to bring the PR issue into other people's radar, we're taking part in righting a wrong that is 120 years old. Whatever it is you do, as long as it has the purpose of raising awareness about the archipelago's US-colonial bondage, it's worth doing and matters far more than you think; and trust me, I know how hard it is to see oneself as relevant when it comes to talking about such a big issue.

The truth of the matter is that I never saw myself as a relevant individual in the large scale of PR's colonial status. All my life I have been interested in and disgusted by how colonialism has permeated and infested the most fundamental elements of my nation's self respect. However, I didn't always see myself as an agent of change on the matter. You see, through its structured and intentional economic program, colonialism conditions and imposes a culture of dependence. Often as a child I would hear people older than me constantly fight

and bicker about politics and the status issue. One of the themes that would constantly be recycled in support of maintaining the current status unchanged is that PR's size and limited economic activity would always hinder any effort to move out of the current dependence dynamic. This made it very hard to see the point in fighting for a non-colonial future for PR. But as time passed and my knowledge base grew, I became aware of the flaws in this train of thought. I eventually decided to reject the notion of PR's supposed inability to flourish outside of a colonial structure and began talking about the subject with others.

At first I'd only talk about it with my friends and family. Once I became comfortable doing this, I opened up strangers about how unfair and degrading PR's colonial status is. As time passed I spoke to more and more people about the issue. Doing this made me feel more confident in expressing myself on this issue, and as chance would have it, the opportunity came to reach even more people through this podcast. The point I'm trying to make is that we all have the potential of having a tangible impact in others. Each one of you could be the determining factor in starting a domino effect that could finally lead to PR's long overdue non-colonial future. No matter how small you see yourself, or how far this goal seems, never buy into the lie that you can't change things. Be bold, be brave, and be persistent. PR needs us to fight for her. We can't let her down.

So with that in mind I sign off, carrying you all in my heart and deeply grateful for all of your support.

As always, one last time, thank you for your time, thank you for listening, *y que viva Puerto Rico.*