

COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES OVERSIGHT PLAN FOR THE 105TH CONGRESS

ADOPTED FEBRUARY 5, 1997

INSULAR AFFAIRS

Resolving Puerto Rico's Political Status: The Puerto Rico Legislature, representing 3.8 million U.S. citizens in this American territory in the Caribbean, has requested the 105th Congress authorize a process to resolve their political status problem. Puerto Rico has successfully demonstrated the ability to operate under a local constitutional government first authorized and then conditionally approved by the Congress in 1950 and 1952, respectively. However, in spite of the decades of democratic changes of a republican form of local constitutional government under the U.S. Constitution, Puerto Rico has yet to achieve a permanent form of full self-government. Puerto Rico held a referendum in 1993 with locally defined status options in which an enhanced "commonwealth" received a plurality of 48 percent, statehood 46 percent, and independence 4 percent. The Committee on Resources considered and overwhelmingly rejected on a bipartisan basis the enhanced "commonwealth" ballot definition as unconstitutional and fiscally and politically inviable. The Puerto Rico Legislature's request makes it clear that permanent disenfranchisement is unacceptable, and that the U.S. must define the political status options of a final relationship of dignity to both parties.

The *United States-Puerto Rico Political Status Act*, reported by the Committee on Resources as H.R. 3024 and subsequently updated as H.R. 4281 in the 104th Congress, provides a bipartisan and balanced framework "to provide a process leading to full self-government for Puerto Rico." The legislation would have authorized a referendum in Puerto Rico before the end of 1998, in which the people would choose between separate sovereignty, statehood, or continuing the current Commonwealth of Puerto Rico structure of local self-government as a territory. The vote would be repeated every four years until a majority of the people are ready to proceed toward complete enfranchisement under separate sovereignty or statehood. A transition plan of 10-years is required with a majority vote for separate sovereignty or statehood. Both Congress and the people of Puerto Rico would have been required to approve the transition plan. Similarly, the bill would have required a final implementation act to be approved by both Congress and the people of Puerto Rico. The legislation would have been a self-determination process, as the people of Puerto Rico have the final say in each of the three stages after Congress acts. The proposed legislation would have required English to be the official language of federal courts and federal agencies in Puerto Rico under statehood, required English language incentives in any statehood transition plan, and encouraged enhancement of the existing century old law in Puerto Rico establishing English as an official language while respecting the Tenth Amendment rights of the people and the state.

Hearings on the legislation are expected to be held by the end of April 1997 in Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico to obtain views of the Administration, leaders of Puerto Rico, and individuals and organizations in Puerto Rico. A similar bill was introduced in the Senate in the 104th Congress and a bicameral effort is anticipated in the 105th Congress to enable the people of Puerto Rico to voice their preference in 1998 towards a final political status.