



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
“The Urgent Need for Congressional Action on Puerto Rico”
December 9, 2015

Mr. Speaker:

As my colleagues are aware, the heavily-indebted U.S. territory of Puerto Rico is ensnared in a severe economic crisis.

My constituents are not responsible for this crisis, but they are its primary victims. I know they would prefer to live, work and raise a family in Puerto Rico, but thousands are departing for the states every month as quality of life in the territory continues to deteriorate. Each time an individual leaves—because they feel *compelled* to go—it represents a small human tragedy.

I have participated in five congressional hearings on Puerto Rico this year. The message I delivered about the roots of the crisis was clear and consistent. I have acknowledged that, over the years, Puerto Rico’s leaders—with a few exceptions—have demonstrated a lack of discipline and transparency in managing Puerto Rico’s public finances. For this, we have no one to blame but ourselves.

But, as I have reiterated time and again, the crisis has a second, equally significant source. It is the relationship between the federal government and Puerto Rico, which is like the relationship between a master and his servant. This relationship is a national disgrace. It denies my constituents, countless numbers of whom have served this country in uniform, the fundamental right to vote for their national leaders. Remember this the next time you hear our country lecture another country about the importance of democracy. As an advocate of statehood for Puerto Rico, I am a proud American citizen, but protesting the mistreatment of my people will always take precedence over being polite.

The relationship between the federal government and Puerto Rico allows you to treat us decently whenever it suits you, and to treat us poorly whenever it does not. We live at your whim, subject to your impulses, which are bound by virtually no legal rules or moral standards. If there is a silver lining in this crisis, it is that the crisis has caused a clear majority of my constituents to conclude that the relationship between the federal government and Puerto Rico must change. Puerto Rico must have equality in this union or independence outside of it. No longer should we be reduced to begging this Congress for crumbs, and hoping you throw some our way. We must get off our knees, stand up straight, look you in the eyes, and say “No more.”

However, until Puerto Rico becomes a state or a sovereign nation, our fate rests largely in the hands of Congress. I have introduced a series of bills that would empower Puerto Rico to help itself. These bills don't seek a hand-out or special treatment. They seek the same or similar treatment as the states receive under federal health and other safety-net programs, federal tax credit programs, and the federal law that authorizes debt restructuring. If Congress declines to act,

it will not be because my colleagues did not have options to choose from; it will be because they made a conscious decision not to choose at all.

Federal action is necessary to prevent a default by the Puerto Rico government on its obligations to creditors, which would be a catastrophic event for all parties. To avoid this outcome, Congress should authorize Puerto Rico to restructure a meaningful portion of its bonded debt, but in a way that honors the territory's constitution. Such authority can be provided at no cost to American taxpayers. If it is, I will not oppose the creation of a temporary, independent board that respects the Puerto Rico government's primary role in crafting its budget and making fiscal policy, but that is authorized to ensure that the Puerto Rico government complies with appropriate budgeting standards and fiscal metrics. Ultimately, what Puerto Rico needs is good elected leadership, not heavy-handed federal intervention that further erodes democracy in the territory.

It is in the national interest for Congress to act—and to act now.