

Porto Ricans to Have a New Constitution

Organic Act Pending in Senate Will Make Islanders Citizens of United States and Give Them Larger Measure of Home Rule

PORTO RICO and her troubles had been in the news so little of late years that when President Wilson, in his recent address to Congress, made a very brief reference to those troubles as something demanding immediate redress, it served as a reminder to the hundred millions of us in continental United States of the almost forgotten fact that there are another million of us on that small rectangular island a few miles off shore.

The troubles which the President had chiefly in mind are lack of citizenship of the islanders in the United States and lack of any adequate form of home rule. The citizenship and a much fuller measure of home rule than Porto Rico now has are both provided for in a bill pending at the present time in the Senate at Washington.

The proposed charter begins with the bill of rights affording full protection to the individual in his person and property under the law. There is a clause forbidding slavery, put in for the express purpose of getting rid of peonage. Absolute freedom in the matter of religion is assured, eight hours is to constitute a legal day's work for public employes, and children under 14 cannot be employed in occupations injurious to health or morals.

Distinct gain in political home rule for the islanders is in the sections covering the legislative department, the enactment of which will give to Porto Rico its first real Legislature of two houses, with the members of both branches elected by the people. Under the present arrangement there is an elected single-branch Legislature, but none of its measures are effective without concurrence by the Council, a body made up of heads of departments who are appointed by the President of the United States.

The chief executive of the island government, as now, will be a Governor appointed by the President of the United States, and he will have a veto power over the native Legislature, but his veto may be overridden by a two-thirds vote.

The long drawn out citizenship muddle is settled by the new organic law proposed for the government of the island by making every Porto Rican a citizen of the United States automatically without effort on the part of the islander. To avoid becoming a citizen of the United States he will have to take the trouble to make formal declaration of

his allegiance to Spain or some other nation.

As it is now, a Porto Rican cannot become a citizen of the United States without going through all the machinery of the naturalization process that is provided for an alien arriving in continental United States. This has been the particular injustice most complained of.

When the United States acquired Porto Rico, nearly twenty years ago, the natives received us with open arms. Our troops were met by committees of natives carrying fruits and flowers. They were tired of Spain and eager to become a part of the United States as citizens. That was what they expected to become immediately.

But Congress demurred. A thousand and one reasons were offered in Washington against conferring citizenship and treating the Porto Ricans as the citizens of a territory of the United States. With the first refusal of Congress there was a break in the unanimity among the islanders in their regard for their new rulers. With subsequent failures at Washington to confer the desired status upon the natives the resentment grew until there developed in the Unionist Party, the dominant political organization, with two-thirds of the votes, a distinct movement hostile to the United States.

In the course of an interview, in which he explained the measure, section by section, Senator John F. Shafroth of Colorado, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Porto Rico, called special attention to added safeguards inserted by his committee after the bill came from the House. These additions, Senator Shafroth thinks, might well be adopted by the United States Congress for its own guidance and restraint.

"It will be impossible under this organic law," he said, "for the Legislature of Porto Rico to appropriate in any year more than the revenues of the island amount to in that same year. If bills for such excess appropriations are passed they will simply be inoperative. They never can be cumulative and pile up as charges against the Treasury, which must be paid in the future. This provision will make it impossible for the Government of Porto Rico to have a deficit."

"The safeguard is copied from a law of my own State, Colorado, which learned its lesson years ago when the Seventh General Assembly of the State went mad on appropriations and authorized many thousands of dollars of expenditures for which there was no cash.

It became necessary to pay even the Governor of the State and the Judges of the Supreme Court in warrants, which were redeemed years later by a bond issue.

"We have also removed temptation from the future lawmakers of Porto Rico by making pork barrel legislation and such things as riders impossible. If anything is put into a bill that is not clearly indicated in the title, that bill, even if passed, is null and void so far as the secret or hidden part of it is concerned. No bill can become a law until ninety days after its passage, and at the last moment the members of the Legislature have final right to protest against its enactment."

Brig. Gen. Frank McIntyre, head of the Bureau of Insular Affairs in the War Department, the agency through which the United States governs Porto Rico, keeps in his desk at Washington a monograph on the civilization of Porto Rico, written by Dr. Cayetano Coll y Toste, in 1897, shortly before the United States took possession. The General finds the paper chiefly interesting and useful as indicating a point of departure, something to show that in the nearly two decades of American rule there has been material improvement in spite of the blundering delays of Congress. Here is an extract from the description as written in 1897:

But, alas, if it is true that we have made much progress, comparing the final pictures of these two last centuries, if it is true that our population has increased so greatly that, from 138,758 persons (in 1797) it has increased, according to the latest estimates, to 802,439 inhabitants, unfortunately in the background of such a state of culture there

appears a black stain, like a blot of ink on a picturesque etching.

Everything in the country displays exuberance and life. The vegetable kingdom is clothed in ample leaves, grows quickly and strong, and clothes the earth on all sides; dark green tints, revealers of the strengthening sap, brighten the landscape on all sides; the cattle, horses, and hogs grow vigorously, while flocks of doves and fowl multiply prodigiously. Only the laborer, the son of our fields, one of the most unfortunate beings of the world, with the pallid face, the bare foot, the fleshless body, the ragged clothing, and the feverish glance, strolls indifferently with the darkness of ignorance in his eyes, dreaming of the fighting cock, a coup at monte, or the prize in the provincial lottery.

No, it is not possible that the tropic zone produces such organic anaemia! This decadence of the body and of the mind, is the daughter of the moral and physical vices that weigh down the spirit and force our peasants to such a condition of social degradation. In the miserable shack, hanging to the side hill like the swallow's nest, comes into the world this unhappy creature; when he opens his eyes to the light of reason he listens not to the village bell that reminds him that it is necessary to lift the mind to the divinity and to tender thanks to the Creator of the worlds; he hears only the hoarse cry of the cock in announcing daylight, and then he wishes the arrival of Sunday to witness the struggles and the gambling of the cockpit.

"We have advanced a long way from that state of affairs," said General McIntyre the other day. "The sugar production of the island is now nine times what it was under Spanish rule, and the prices received are higher. Not so much of this increased profit of the plantations is distributed among all the people as should be, but there has been so much improvement in that respect that labor now gets four times as much as it did. And general living conditions of the people are by that much the better."