

Reforming the Legislature



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

The New Progressive Party (NPP) and the Popular Democratic Party (PDP) have staked out positions for reforming our Legislature. They respond to the repulsive attitude created in public opinion regarding the workings of this branch of our government.

Public opinion's perception of the Legislature has changed since the law providing for two regular legislative sessions was approved during my last administration and the law providing for full-time legislators was approved by the administration of former Gov. Pedro Rosselló.

Since then, it has been downhill for that branch of government.

Public discontent is more than justified. These changes have wrought upon the commonwealth a deluge of regulation which, compounded by a bloated, politicized and unresponsive bureaucracy, shackles the workings of our society and stultifies the growth of our economy. Adding insult to injury, the full-time legislators privileged themselves with hefty salaries, per diems and cars; in no legislature in the states, nor in Congress, nor in any foreign country that I know of, do individual legislators have cars. In addition, they bloated their budgets to provide their cronies with contracts for alleged professional services already provided by the once highly competent and respected Office of Legislative Services in the Capitol.

When I was president of the Senate, the Senate budget amounted to \$2.9 million; the current budget of this chamber is \$38 million. Discount inflation and this is still an exorbitant increase. With less than 10% of the current budget, we performed the same functions, and I won't dwell on the question of the quality of our advisers or the legislative product.

A few years ago, responding to this situation, reform-minded legislators led by then-Sen. Eudaldo Báez Galib enacted legislation that called for a popular vote to change the two-chambered Legislature into a unicameral body. This elicited a minor turnout of our registered voters, but of those who did vote, the majority was for the unicameral legislature. Nothing became of this vote because the procedure for a constitutional amendment hadn't been followed. It was merely a public opinion poll.

Given this experience and the current behavior of some legislators; both the NPP and the PDP have set out to reform the Legislature. Their approaches differ, however. Following the prescribed procedure, the NPP proposes a

constitutional amendment that will maintain both Houses, but will limit the number of legislators, both senators and representatives. This, rather than a well-thought-out reform striking at the causes of the problem, is a knee jerk reaction to the contempt and anger in public opinion as to the goings on in our Capitol.

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I have no doubt that it will pass muster with the electorate, for it gives voters the opportunity to vent their frustrations with their lawmakers. But it won't solve the problem. The problem isn't the number of legislators; it is how they discharge their responsibilities and how they use their power.

Limiting the numbers of legislators widens the

geographical scope of their responsibilities, making it harder to discharge district-based problem resolution. It also limits access to legislators by their constituents, for the legislator will have to attend to a larger number of them. Limiting the number of legislators gives more power to those that remain. If other measures aren't taken, this will only compound the problem.

The PDP proposes measures that will correct the problem. The first is to do away with the second regular session of the Legislature. This will get legislators to focus on important matters in the first and only session, reducing the space that has promoted overregulation. If specific issues need attention after the regular session, the governor may call a special session in which the agenda set by him will be the only one.

The second important reform measure will do away with the full-time legislator and usher in the citizen legislator. This should generate more public-spirited and better professionally prepared legislators, doing away with the political careerism promoted by the full-time concept.

The third measure is cutting the budget of the Legislature by 30%. This measure should do away with privileges such as cars and the proliferation of contracts for unnecessary services awarded to political cronies.

These steps will go a long way in achieving the legislative reform that Puerto Rico demands and deserves.

Focusing legislative power on our important problems—crime, jobs, the economy, education, health—is critical so that the quality of our government is improved during the critical period Puerto Rico will undergo during the next term of our government. Getting our legislators to focus is no mean task of governmental leadership. Perhaps it is one of the most important tests of executive capacity to lead.

PDP gubernatorial candidate Alejandro García Padilla set out the reforms that were endorsed by the PDP Convention and are now part of the party's platform, and he provided the leadership for legislators to give up their misused power and privileges. In the nitty-gritty world of politicians and legislatures, this was a monumental undertaking. He deserves credit for this. He is growing in leadership, a key factor for what he must do if elected governor. ■

Rafael Hernández Colón is a three-term (12-year) former governor of Puerto Rico (1973-76 and 1985-92). He served as Justice secretary (1965-67) and Senate president (1969-72). He was president of the Popular Democratic Party for 19 years. Comments on this article are welcome at caribbeanbusiness.pr. Go to the "Sign in" link on the homepage to participate. Emails also may be sent to column@caribbeanbusiness.pr.