

Address of Hon. Arthur Yager, Governor of Porto Rico,
at the Lake Mohonk Conference, October 22, 1915.

FUNDAMENTAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL
PROBLEMS OF PORTO RICO.

I desire to present to this audience a very brief discussion or at least statement of what I consider the two most important and fundamental problems of the beautiful tropical island which it has fallen to our lot to govern. These two problems, while in a way they are distinct and separate, are nevertheless connected, and in the solution of both of them the local government of Porto Rico is absolutely dependent upon the aid of the great nation to which it belongs.

The first, the most important and the most difficult of these problems is the social problem. I mean by that the task of raising the standard of life, increasing the opportunities, the comfort and the happiness of the great masses of the people who live in the island.

That there is much wretchedness and poverty among the masses of the people of Porto Rico is beyond dispute. Their dwellings are, for the most part mere hovels, almost devoid of furniture and crowded beyond belief. Their food consists of rice, codfish and beans, supplemented by the native fruits which grow wild and practically all over the island. And their wages are, as a rule barely sufficient to maintain their existence under these miserable conditions. These conditions have prevailed in Porto Rico for a great many years, and while much has been done in many ways to improve and build up the island since the American occupation, for reasons that will appear later, it has not been possible to make any very marked improvement in these basic conditions.

There are doubtless several causes for this state of things, but undoubtedly the fundamental cause is the enormous population. This population is at present conservatively estimated at 1,200,000 people. It was 1,118,000 in 1910, according to the official census, and it has been steadily increasing since that date.

The gross area of the island, land and water, including the small adjacent and dependent islands, is 3435 square miles, and the present population therefore is about 350 to the square mile. This is a greater density than that of China or of India and just about equal to that of Japan. It is ten times greater than that of the United States proper and three times as great as that of New England. In fact there are only two or three small states in the American Union that have more people per square mile, namely Massachusetts, Rhode Island and perhaps New Jersey, and in these states about three-quarters of the people live in cities and depend upon manufactures, while in Porto Rico only about 10% of the people live in cities of more than 10,000 population and there are almost no manufactures. In short, if we consider both the area and the industrial development of this little island there is perhaps no region in the whole world more densely populated.

The area of the island is about four-fifths mountainous, much of it so steep that it can hardly be cultivated at all, and yet this great population is so evenly distributed over its whole surface that the center of population is only about 5 miles distant in a straight line from the geographical center of the island. Moreover, this population has been produced by the natural increase of the people right in the island. There is practically no immigration, and according to the census of 1910, there were only about one per cent of the people of foreign birth.

Finally the population of Porto Rico great as it is, is steadily increasing. The first census taken by the Americans in 1899 enumerated in round numbers 953,000 people in Porto Rico. By 1915, we find they have increased by 250,000. By comparison with the census taken by the Spanish government in 1887 which enumerated 732,000, we find that in the twenty-two years immediately preceding the coming of the Americans there was an increase of 221,000 people, or about 30%, while in the SIXTEEN years since the American annexation there has been an increase of 250,000, or about 27%. To put it another way, during the latter part of the Spanish period, the average annual increase was about 1.3%, while during the whole of the American period, it has been 1.6%. The increase last year according to the official reports of births and deaths was 24,000 or 2% of the whole population. This rapid increase in population has been made possible by the commercial expansion and industrial development that has followed the American

occupation. This expansion will be made evident by the following figures.

The production and export of coffee remains at about the same figure as in Spanish times. The output of the sugar industry has been multiplied by six, going up from some 50 to 60 thousand tons in Spanish times to about 350,000 tons at present. The export of tobacco, cigars, etc., has been increased more than nine times, going up from about \$1,000,000 worth in Spanish times to about \$9,250,000 at present. The fruit industry has been created and developed entirely by Americans, the exports of which during the past year reached a total of about 4-1/2 millions of dollars.

But this great increase in the exports of the whole island may be illustrated by comparing the figures for 1901, which show total exports of slightly more than 8-1/2 millions of dollars, with those of the present which are about 49-1/3 millions of dollars.

This large expansion of commerce has certainly enlarged greatly the opportunities for employment among the laboring population. Instead, however, of raising the standard of living and increasing the wages of agricultural workers in any marked degree, it has resulted chiefly in a large increase of their numbers. The conclusion therefore seems to be that Porto Rico has reached that painful stage in its economic development where the natural increase in its population has outrun the means of employment and where the standard of living has consequently been pressed down to the lowest limit.

The people of Porto Rico are a kindly, charitable, lovable people; their patriotic love of their island home is worthy of all praise. The devotion of the parents to their children, especially of the mothers to their offspring is equal to that shown among the people of any land. But, owing to their inherited improvidence, their racial characteristics, and perhaps to the tropical climate, those checks upon population which in colder climates seem adequate to keep the increase of the people well within the limits of subsistence seem to be lacking among them. The birth rate seems to bear no relation whatever to the conditions of industry and the opportunities for employment.

I have called attention to this great sociological problem at this time, because it seems to me that those of us who are responsible for the future of the island should face it now. In my judgment it is not only im-

portant but it is urgent. With the population already pressing hard upon the means of employment, if any unexpected calamity should befall any of the island's industries there would result more serious suffering among the laboring people of Porto Rico than the Insular Government could possibly relieve, with the means at its command. If, for example, a cyclone should devastate the coffee plantations, as actually happened in 1899, the situation might become very critical. Or, if as now seems certain, under the recent tariff law, the protective duty on sugar should be abolished, and the decline of that great industry which everybody predicts should actually take place, the problem of feeding the unemployed in the island would soon become most serious.

What, therefore, should be done to meet and forestall the coming of even worse conditions than now exist? I do not hesitate to express my belief that the only really effective remedy is the transfer of large numbers of Porto Ricans to some other region. I do not believe that there is in history any instance of a country that has reached the overcrowded condition in which Porto Rico now stands, that ever escaped from it without the aid of emigration. Whatever can be done in other ways to improve conditions should still be done, but those things alone will not solve the problem.

It is a great biological law that we are confronted with and we can neither alter nor repeal it. Education, labor legislation, land legislation, bank legislation may help, but these measures must be supplemented by finding some means of relief from the oncoming crowd of surplus population if we are to reach a real remedy.

This matter of the need of emigration from Porto Rico is no new idea. It has been suggested and tried before, - not by government, but by private agencies. Soon after the American occupation effort was made by certain corporations to transfer a large number of Porto Ricans to the Hawaiian Islands where laborers were too scarce to supply the demand. More than 5000 were taken over there in 1901. But no effort to sift these emigrants as to character was made and many of them became homesick and unhappy in that distant and strange land, and so many complaints and charges of mistreatment and suffering found their way to Porto Rico that both the American and Porto Rican Governments had to make several investigations, all of which however led to no definite result, - except that later in spite of efforts made and inducements offered to continue this

movement, no more Porto Ricans could be persuaded to go there. Somewhat later there was inaugurated by private agencies a considerable emigration to Mexico, but this ended still more discouragingly partly due no doubt to the character of the emigrants and partly to real mistreatment by the corporations who initiated the movement.

At present it seems certain that there is one country only which lies hopefully open to a movement of Porto Ricans out of their own island, and that is Santo Domingo. Many have gone there in spite of the dangers due to the unstable political conditions which have prevailed there for almost a century. The island is only about eighty miles from the shores of Porto Rico. It is almost identical in climate, physical characteristics, products, people and language. On this account there would be little shock in change of residence. It has now only about thirty people to the square mile. Vast stretches of fertile virgin soil await the hand of labor, and the two islands could be made to fit together like hand and glove. I believe it to be the duty of the United States to make, if possible, such arrangements as may accomplish the purpose that these two neighboring islands, over which the American government has assumed the complete or partial control, should supplement each other's needs in respect to population and social development. This might be done without embarrassment to our international relations with other Latin-American countries and without any alteration of the policies hitherto pursued. Treaty arrangements might be entered into between the governments of the United States and Santo Domingo which would include a practical scheme of emigration under governmental encouragement and aid of the surplus population of the smaller island to the unoccupied lands of the larger. In this way the greatest problem of both islands would be solved through the redistribution of population. That there would arise some complications and practical difficulties in carrying out this scheme is doubtless true, but that it is feasible and practicable if undertaken earnestly, I have no doubt. That it is within the power and rights of the American Government in view of its responsibilities in both of these islands as well as in the Caribbean Sea generally seems to be clear, and that it would meet general approval among the people of both islands seems highly probable.

THE POLITICAL PROBLEM.

The political task set for themselves by the Americans in Porto Rico is frankly educational. It involved three things, namely,-

(1) The organization and continuous administration of a stable, economical and efficient government, embodying in it democratic institutions and ideals in conformity with American standards to as large a degree as the previous history, customs and political ~~history,~~ ~~customs and political~~ experience of the people made possible.

(2) The political training and development of the people of the island to take part in, and assist in the carrying on of this government just as rapidly as was consistent with safety and the preservation of the true democratic spirit and the American ideals.

(3) To make the Porto Ricans themselves reasonably satisfied with this government, so as to secure their cooperation in the educational effort, which cooperation is necessary to its success.

The Foraker Act granting a constitution to Porto Rico was framed and passed by Congress in 1900, and became effective the same year.

Without attempting to explain or characterize this Act in detail, I shall content myself with stating that, when we consider that neither Congress nor the people of the United States had had any previous experience in governing peoples like those of this newly acquired possession, it is surprising that they did as well as they did, and produced at one stroke an organic act that has on the whole served its purpose so well. The Foraker Act, however, was avowedly temporary, and in my judgment the time has fully come when a new constitution should be given to Porto Rico, embodying the results of our fifteen years of experience, and recognizing as far as can be done with prudence the success of our educational experiment.

I think I can in a few minutes sketch in bold outline what this new organic act should contain:

(1) It should grant to the people of Porto Rico collectively citizenship in the United States. I know

of no simple gift that would go so far toward removing dissatisfaction and difficulty in Porto Rico as this simple grant of citizenship, and none that would be attended with so little cost and risk.

People speak of citizenship as a "privilege." To my mind it is not a privilege at all, but a right. It is the necessary complement of sovereignty and should go with the flag. Wherever the American flag is permanently planted over any territory the people of that territory should be made citizens of the country whose flag they serve. The people of Porto Rico must obey all the laws of the United States, pay taxes, are liable to military service, and yet they are not citizens.

Citizenship does not at all imply suffrage or the power to vote for any officer of government or anything else. On the other hand suffrage is a privilege conferred by all democratic governments upon certain classes of their citizens according to the prevailing views of public policy. In the United States there are now many more citizens who have not the privilege of suffrage than those who have.

The people of the District of Columbia never have had the privilege to vote for anybody or anything and yet they are citizens. Most of the negroes of the South, all of the minors of both sexes, and as yet an immense majority of the women of the country are not permitted to exercise the power of voting, and yet no one would think of excluding any of these classes from the right of citizenship.

I desire to add that I have not been able to discover in Congress or in the Administration during the past two winters any opposition to this grant of citizenship. Moreover the failure of Congress to include citizenship at the beginning was not due to any unwillingness to do so, but to the fear, at that time, that conferring citizenship might endanger the constitutionality of the peculiar fiscal system that it was necessary to establish in the island. The Foraker Act as originally drawn contained the grant of citizenship, and Mr. Foraker himself explained on the floor of the Senate that at the last moment, the Senate Committee struck out the words "Citizens of the United States" and substituted "Citizens of Porto Rico" because of the fear above mentioned. This danger has long since been removed by the various decisions of the Supreme Court defining the relations to the United States of the recently acquired island possessions, and the powers of

Congress in regard to them. So that now there is no difficulty to be apprehended in granting citizenship to the people of Porto Rico and no good reason why it should not be done.

(2) The new organic act should contain some enlargement of the rights of participation in their own government on the part of the Porto Ricans themselves. Just how much enlargement and in what particulars are matters of detail and should be worked out with a view to the most liberal regard for the legitimate aspirations of the people of the island that is consistent with safety and the continued efficiency of the government. This enlargement is also necessary to the vindication of our educational purpose and the recognition of the undoubted progress that has been made in the past fifteen years.

In my judgement an elective Senate should be included in the new constitution, thus separating executive from legislative functions in accordance with the universal American practice and increasing local responsibility. Moreover, opportunities should be offered more freely to Porto Ricans themselves for appointment under proper safeguards to the highest executive offices in their own government.

(3) Finally, some mistakes that were made in the first constitution and in the development of the government under it should be frankly corrected in accordance with the teaching of our fifteen years of experience.

That some mistakes would be made was inevitable, and experience has clearly pointed them out.

The most important and fundamental mistake, and still the most natural under the circumstances, was extending the suffrage to all male Porto Ricans over 21 years of age. This has produced a body of electors in Porto Rico, about 70% of whom are not only illiterate, but have had no sort of political experience or training that would fit them for the exercise of this important privilege. Most peoples have acquired their rights of self-government through revolutionary effort, - sometimes repeated revolutionary efforts on their part. These revolutions have always given to large numbers of the people some experience and training through the organization and struggle necessary to secure their freedom, which have fitted them in some degree for the duties of voting and other acts of self-government.

There have never been any revolutionary struggles in Porto Rico and this sort of training is lacking. It should be stated here that Congress did not grant directly to the island this extended form of suffrage. It was done by the local legislature, which was given the power to do so, in their natural but mistaken zeal to secure too quickly the form of democratic institutions even though they missed the reality. The results of this widely extended suffrage among an untrained people may readily be imagined; but I desire to state that the people of the island, especially the political leaders, have sought to minimize the evils as best they could. No healthy political life is possible under these conditions, and Congress is the only authority that can correct it and should do so, by establishing some fair and reasonable restriction upon the suffrage.

Another mistake that should be corrected is the manner of dividing the island into districts for electoral purposes in which a departure was made from the usual American plan of forming single-member districts for electing members of the popular branch of the legislature, and this has worked badly. In Porto Rico the house of delegates is elected from seven large districts into which the island is subdivided and each of which elects five members on a general ticket. This system destroys the feeling of direct responsibility on the part of the members to their constituents and should be replaced with the usual American system of electing one member from each district.

Another mistake is the holding of elections more frequently than is necessary for any good political reason. The island is small and party rivalry very keen and the cost and general disturbance of business caused by elections are quite considerable and there seems to be no good reason why they should be repeated oftener than once every four years. There are various other minor improvements that might be made in the actual working constitution of the island as demonstrated by experience and all this should be given careful consideration in the formation of the new constitution.

Finally there remains the important and much discussed problem of the future ultimate status of Porto Rico, i.e., the ultimate relation of the island to the United States. - The final goal for which the people of the island should be gradually prepared. This is a question about which there is great diversity of opinion amongst the people of Porto Rico and perhaps still greater diversity of opinion amongst the people of the United

States. Should we seek to make Porto Rico at some future date a state in the American union or should we have in view that of a small autonomous country under some kind of American control and protection? It has always seemed to me that the settlement of this question is not of immediate and urgent importance and that the public opinion of the United States and of Porto Rico is not yet ready to determine it. In whatever way it may finally be determined, the work for the present would remain the same, namely that of education and of political preparation for either destiny. For whatever may be the ultimate status of the island, the people of Porto Rico must learn to govern themselves. Therefore as nothing of great importance could be gained by settling this question now and as the attempt to determine it would perhaps raise an interminable discussion in both the United States and Porto Rico, it seems to me the part of wisdom to leave the matter of the ultimate destiny of the island for another generation which would have much additional light for its guidance in determining so important a matter.

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WILLIAM R. CORWINE

13 ASTOR PLACE

NEW YORK November 16, 1915.

Hon. Arthur Yager,
Governor of Porto Rico,
San Juan, Porto Rico, W. I.

My dear Governor Yager:

I thank you very much for the privilege you afforded me of reading the address you delivered at the Lake Mohonk Conference, October 22, 1915, bearing upon the fundamental social and political problems of Porto Rico.

I had read a brief extract from the address as published in some of the newspapers, but found that the presentation as put by you in its entirety was far more interesting and far more illuminating than the short quoted portions which were published.

I am sorry that I had such a brief period of time at my disposal, and that you yourself were so hurried when I had the pleasure of calling upon you the afternoon of the day upon which I sailed for home.

When you come to New York on your way to Washington I would enjoy very much the pleasure of a further talk with you, and if you will let me know when and where you can be seen when here, I shall take great pleasure in placing myself at your disposal.

Should you deem it best to print the document lent me, I hope you will favor me with a copy for my files.

With kind regards and best wishes, I am, my dear Mr. Governor,

Sincerely yours,

William R. Corwine

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