

(H.B. 2992)

(No. 282)

(Approved December 22, 2006)

## AN ACT

To declare the 21<sup>st</sup> of September of each year as the Day of the Anniversary of the Birth of Leopoldo Figueroa Carreras, Dean of Puerto Rican Legislators.

### STATEMENT OF MOTIVES

Doctor Leopoldo Figueroa Carreras, legislator, political leader, public servant, journalist, physician and attorney, well deserves the title of Dean of Puerto Rican Legislators.

Figueroa was born in San Juan on September 21, 1887, into a family where liberal thought prevailed. His father was an intimate friend and confidante of the illustrious Puerto Rican, Luis Muñoz Rivera. His uncle, Sotero Figueroa, friend and companion-at-arms of José Martí, assumed the direction of the newspaper Patria when Martí left to fight in the Cuban wilderness.

From his youth Figueroa made evident his inclination towards the political life, being initiated in that endeavor in the year 1900 when he was not even 14 years of age by participating in activities of the *Partido Federal Americano* (American Federal Party), founded by Muñoz Rivera.

In 1904 that party became the *Unión de Puerto Rico* (Union of Puerto Rico) and approved a *Declaración de Principios* (Declaration of Principles),

whose Fifth Article stated the following: “We declare that we believe feasible that the Island of Puerto Rico be confederated with the United States of North America, agreeing that it be a State of the American Union, a means through which we may have the self-government we need and ask for, recognized; and we also declare that the Island of Puerto Rico may be declared an independent nation under the protectorate of the United States, a means through which we may also have the self-government we need and ask for, recognized.” (Our Translation)

Young Leopoldo Figueroa then embraced the ideal of independence. He understood that he would be useful to his country if he cultivated his intelligence. In 1906, while he was a member of the *Subcomité Unionista de Cataño* (Cataño Unionist Subcommittee), he left for Cuba to study medicine. On leaving, he published an article which he entitled *Adios Patria* (Farewell my Country) in the weekly journal El Eco de Cataño (The Cataño Echo), promising to return “to put himself unconditionally on the side of the country’s welfare and to fight the impositions of the tyrant.” (Our Translation)

While in Havana, Figueroa would meet with illustrious Puerto Ricans who resided there, such as Lola Rodríguez de Tió, Sergio Cuevas Zequeira and his uncle Sotero Figueroa. In 1910 he graduated as Doctor in Medicine from the University of Havana.

At his return he rejoined the political struggle and resumed his defense of independence. During the Unionist Assembly of 1912, held in Mayagüez, the young and impetuous doctor introduced a motion to eliminate statehood from the Fifth Article of the Union, to which leaders such as Herminio Díaz Navarro, Rafael Cuevas Zequeira and Martín Travieso were opposed.

During the 1914 elections, Dr. Leopoldo Figueroa was elected in the unionist ballot to the Chamber of Delegates for the District of San Juan.

The following year, 1915, Figueroa left with José de Diego to spread the word for independence in the Dominican Republic and Cuba and to organize the *Unión Antillana* (Antilles Union).

In 1920, together with José S. Alegría and Eugenio Font Suárez, Dr. Figueroa founded the *Asociación Independentista* (Independence Association). After the elections held that year he went on to hold office as Public Service Commissioner, then an elective office.

The *Alianza Puertorriqueña* (Puerto Rican Alliance), constituted in the 1924 elections, was formed by the *Unión de Puerto Rico* and a sector of the Puerto Rican Republican Party. The new party reelected Dr. Figueroa to the office of Public Service Commissioner.

Around that time the politician also practiced his medical profession, directing the Lepers Sanatorium and the San Juan Maternity Hospital.

He had already achieved his full ideological transformation. “Explaining his political change of attitude, Dr. Figueroa has repeatedly stated that his heart had always made him defend the independence of the Island and that later, in his maturity, his brain drove him to spread the word on behalf of the statehood idea” (Our Translation). Teófilo Maldonado, Hombres de Primera Plana (1958), page 136.

Years later, Dr. Figueroa himself explained, in his own words, that decisive moment: “And since political men cannot become fossilized with utopian ideas, but must live by adapting to the realism needed to achieve the happiness of their people, even at the expense of the sentimental wringing of their hearts, or the dimming of the brilliant ideal, it is because of this that we defend the ideal that in the past we battled, together with the illustrious men

Muñoz Rivera and José de Diego and facing the no less illustrious men Barbosa and Martínez Nadal” (Our Translation). Jorge Font Saldaña “Entrevista con un personaje que se adentra en la leyenda,” Revista Bohemia, October 27, 1963.

The intellectual inquisitiveness of Dr. Figueroa leads him to enroll at the Law School of the University of Puerto Rico from where he obtained a law degree in 1927.

By 1929 the *Alianza Puertorriqueña* began to come apart and a large sector of former unionists left the party to establish the Partido Liberal Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Liberal Party), under the leadership of Antonio R. Barceló.

The members of the *Alianza* who remained with that party, among them Dr. Figueroa, regrouped, electing Rafael Cuevas Zequeira as their president and inviting the legislators of the Coalición Republicano-Socialista (Republican-Socialist Coalition) to organize the chambers under a *Grupo de Buen Gobierno* (Group for Good Government). An agreement was reached through which Antonio R. Barceló was substituted by Luis Sanchez Morales as president of the Senate and José Tous Soto, who resigned from the presidency of the House of Representatives, was replaced by Manuel F. Rossy.

Dr. Figueroa, who was the representative of the *Alianza* at the Insular Board of Elections, actively participated in a process which led to the fusion of the *Alianza* with the *Partido Republicano Puro* (Pure Republican Party), after which the *Partido Unión Republicana* (Republican Union Party) was constituted in 1932 under the presidency of Rafael Martínez Nadal.

The *Unión Republicana* had Dr. Figueroa as its General Secretary and representative to the Insular Board of Elections from 1932.

At the same time, the *Unión Republicana* renewed the pact with the Socialist Party of Santiago Iglesias Pantín. Both parties, as a Coalition, nominated Dr. Leopoldo Figueroa Carreras as candidate to representative for District Number 4 (Bayamón-Cataño-Guaynabo) a seat to which he was reelected in 1936 and 1940.

Dr. Figueroa was a close collaborator of Rafael Martínez Nadal, who referred to him as the “Cyrenean who has unselfishly helped me to carry this cross of the responsibility for directing the Partido Unión Republicana.”

As majority legislator Figueroa Carreras was the proponent of the Charity Hospital Act which allowed the construction of district hospitals. He collaborated in the approval of the legislation passed from 1933 to 1940, which were difficult years due to the depression that was affecting the world. Some of the measures approved at that time include the creation of the State Insurance Fund and of the Industrial Commission; the Eight-hour Act, universal suffrage; the strengthening of the retirement fund for government employees; the Lottery Act; the elimination of the slums; and many others. A concurrent resolution was also approved to solicit that the Congress of the United States authorize the People of Puerto Rico to adopt its own Constitution.

When the Popular Democratic Party began its inscription process in 1938, a measure was introduced to make the inscription of the party feasible so that it might have the same rights as the other parties. Regarding the process followed for said bill, journalist Antonio Pacheco Padró expressed the following: “I had to intervene several times to save the bill from its certain defeat, appealing to the kindness and chivalrous nature of Dr. Leopoldo Figueroa whose intervention was happily decisive in favor of the measure” (Our Translation).

At an assembly held at the Tapia Theater in San Juan on August 19, 1944, Figueroa Carreras was elected First Vice-president of the Unión Republicana Progresista (Progressive Republican Union) and was nominated as senator-at-large, an office to which he was elected in the November elections.

While Leopoldo Figueroa was Senator, the Popular Party majority submitted and approved legislation which was described as repressive and attempting against freedom of speech and as a violation of the civil rights of the citizens. It is presumed that such legislation was a reaction of the Popular majority to the events that took place during the strike at the University of Puerto Rico. Senator Figueroa strongly criticized the measure and gave it the name by which it is still known today: The Gag Act.

In 1948, when the House had thirty-nine seats, thirty-eight (38) representatives from the Popular Party were elected and only one from the Puerto Rico Statehood Party, Leopoldo Figueroa Carreras.

On August 27, 1951, the election of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention, which had the task of drafting what is now the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico was held. The ninety-two (92) delegates were distributed as follows: seventy (70) from the Popular Democratic Party; seven (7) from the Socialist Party and fifteen (15) from the Statehood Party, one of which was Dr. Figueroa.

Atty. Jaime Benítez, upon passing judgment on the intervention of Figueroa Carreras during the Constitutional Convention, stated: "During that fruitful term I was able to intimately appreciate the wealth of knowledge and experiences, the stamina, tenacity and integrity of Doctor Figueroa, his polemical and parliamentary resources, his strong personality and his effectiveness as spokesman for a programmatic sector in the Minority...

That indefatigable fighter knew and practiced the principle which as been known to and practiced by all authentic forgers of Puerto Rican public life: the principle of loyal opposition. Within that principle the Puerto Rican community enjoys such solidarity that in the last instance no leader can legitimately crush” (Our Translation). (El Mundo, October 17, 1969).

Upon the proclamation of the new Constitution, Figueroa was again nominated as representative-at-large for the Republican Statehood Party (PER, Spanish acronym) and elected in the 1952, 1956, 1960 and 1964 elections.

Figueroa Carreras participated directly during the chats that took place at the residence of Luis Muñoz Marín in 1962 among leaders of the Popular and the Statehood Parties which led to what was to be known as the *Pacto de Trujillo Alto* (Trujillo Alto Pact).

In accordance with that agreement the Legislature was convened in a special session whereby Joint Resolution No. 1 of December 3, 1962, was approved: “To propose to the Congress of the United States of America the procedure for establishing the subsequent final political status of the people of Puerto Rico.”

A special assembly of the PER was held in January 22, 1967, to determine whether the party was going to participate in the plebiscite on the status that would be held that year. The majority of the leaders of that party favored abstention, but Leopoldo Figueroa in support of the position adopted by Luis A. Ferré, who favored participating in the consultation, gave a speech before the assembly.

The decision of the PER of not participating in the plebiscite of July 23, 1967, led to the creation of the *Estadistas Unidos* (United for Statehood) organization and subsequently to the foundation of the New Progressive

Party. Figueroa Carreras joined that party of which he was an advisor, floor leader at the House of Representatives and its first representative at the State Elections Board. Antonio Quiñones Calderón, Historia Política de Puerto Rico (2003).

Luis A. Ferré was elected Governor in 1968 and the NPP obtained the majority at the House of Representatives. The new Speaker of that Chamber, Angel Viera Martínez had Figueroa Carreras as his parliamentary advisor until his death on October 15, 1969.

In remembering this illustrious Puerto Rican citizen it is proper to bear in mind certain words of Luis Muñoz Marín spoken before the Legislature in 1959. The former governor was referring to certain expressions of the floor leader of the Pro-statehood Republican Minority before the House of Representatives regarding a bill on property reappraisal. Upon finishing his statement Muñoz Marín said: “I have quoted a man of whom this Legislature can be proud and to whom no one would deny the title of being the legislator with the most distinguished history among the minorities and of having the most ample parliamentary experience from among all legislators: Dr. Leopoldo Figueroa” (Our Translation).

***BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF PUERTO RICO:***

Section 1.-The 21<sup>st</sup> of September of each year is hereby declared to be the Day of the Anniversary of the Birth of Leopoldo Figueroa Carreras, Dean of Puerto Rican Legislators.

Section 2.-The Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President of the Senate of Puerto Rico shall adopt the measures needed and convenient to render tribute in remembrance of this illustrious Puerto Rican citizen.

Section 3.-This Act shall take effect immediately after its approval.



## **CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify to the Secretary of State that the following Act No. 282 (H.B. 2992) of the 4<sup>th</sup> Session of the 15<sup>th</sup> Legislature of Puerto Rico:

**AN ACT** to declare the 21<sup>st</sup> of September of each year as the Day of the Anniversary of the Birth of Leopoldo Figueroa Carreras, Dean of Puerto Rican Legislators,

has been translated from Spanish to English and that the English version is correct.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, today 15<sup>th</sup> of October of 2007.

Francisco J. Domenech  
Director