

Baltasar Corrada-del Río

1935–

RESIDENT COMMISSIONER 1977–1985
NEW PROGRESSIVE FROM PUERTO RICO

Baltasar Corrada-del Río began his career as a leading human rights advocate in Puerto Rico and quickly became one of the island’s most influential Resident Commissioners. A leading figure in the Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party, or PNP) and a champion of Puerto Rican statehood, Corrada-del Río took an active interest in the concerns of minority citizens nationwide. Having helped found the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), he worked to ensure that Puerto Ricans and Hispanic Americans everywhere had access to important federal programs. “To me,” he said toward the end of his career in the House, “it is quite an honor to be able to represent the interests of the Hispanic community.”¹

Corrada-del Río was born on April 10, 1935, in Morovis, Puerto Rico, to Rómulo Corrada and Ana María del Río. He attended the Morovis public grammar school until he was 13 and graduated from Colegio Ponceño de Varones high school in 1952. He immediately enrolled at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in social sciences four years later. He remained at the university and completed a law degree in 1959. That year he married Beatriz A. Betances. They had four children: Ana Isabel, Francisco Javier, Juan Carlos, and José B.²

Corrada-del Río was admitted to the bar in 1959, quickly made partner at a leading firm, and began a long and distinguished legal career. Unlike many Resident Commissioners, Corrada-del Río shied away from electoral office early on and often accepted leadership positions behind the scenes. In 1969, for instance, as the island’s administration faced accusations of political suppression, Corrada-del Río was appointed to Puerto Rico’s civil rights commission, which he chaired from 1970 to 1972.³ In 1970 alone he was a member of the Advisory Committee to the Archbishop of Puerto Rico

on Drug Abuse; the Puerto Rican Medical Association’s Council of Public Health; and the Puerto Rican Bar Examination Board, having been appointed by the island’s supreme court.⁴

By the mid-1970s, Corrada-del Río was one of the island’s most respected human rights lawyers, known as “one of the bright young men of the New Progressive Party.”⁵ He wrote a regular column for *El mundo*, a leading island newspaper, and served as a member of the PNP’s executive committee and as chairman of its committee on political status.⁶

Just 41 years old in 1976, Corrada-del Río had undergone a meteoric rise to become the PNP’s front-runner for Puerto Rico’s House seat in Washington. After he was formally nominated, Corrada-del Río faced incumbent Popular Democrat Jaime Benítez in the general election that year. Benítez was a well-known educator who had won by a landslide in 1972, but the island’s economy had gone into a tailspin since his victory. “We think our chances are quite good,” Corrada-del Río told the *Baltimore Sun* as Election Day neared.⁷ In one of the closer elections in recent memory, he defeated Benítez by only 2.9 percent.⁸

When Corrada-del Río arrived in Washington, he broke with precedent to caucus with House Democrats. Since 1971, when Resident Commissioners won the right to vote in committee, they had essentially been required to join a mainland party caucus. New Progressives had loose ties to the GOP, and Jorge L. Córdova-Díaz, the last PNP official to serve in Washington, had elected to sit with Republicans. In the next Congress, Benítez, who was a member of the Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD), had caucused with Democrats to maintain parity. But Corrada-del Río broke that pattern, telling the *Washington Post* in 1977 that he was a “longtime Democrat.” Paired with his membership





in “the militantly pro-statehood wing of the [PNP],” Corrada-del Río’s affiliation led him to support a strong federal state and its attendant public programs. “I like the Democratic Party[’s] stand on social and economic issues,” he said around the time of his swearing-in, “and feel I can accomplish a lot more for Puerto Rico by siding with the Democrats.”⁹ Corrada-del Río was appointed to the Committee on Education and Labor and the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, both traditional posts for Resident Commissioners. In mid-October 1977, the House appointed him to the Select Committee on Population, citing a need to study “the causes of changing population conditions and their consequences for the United States and the world.”¹⁰

Corrada-del Río’s tenure in the House marked a new chapter in the island’s relationship with the federal government, reinvigorating the New Progressives’ push for statehood. Corrada-del Río favored the outgoing Gerald Ford administration’s decision to delay action on statehood, noting that he preferred “to be in power when these matters were decided.” He refused to support any statehood measure originating in Congress that was not supported by an island plebiscite, and he criticized commonwealth supporters who fought to keep the government at a distance, only to structure insular policy around federal appropriations.¹¹ “Federal funds ... must be understood and used as a complement and not as a substitute for Puerto Rican efforts,” he said in a statement that dovetailed with his pro-statehood position.¹² Corrada-del Río promised that statehood would do little to impinge on Puerto Rico’s unique culture. “We would continue doing the same things we do now,” he said in 1977, “thinking, speaking, and praying in Spanish, without underestimating the importance of being bilingual.... In other words, we would continue practicing and enriching our customs, our traditions and our culture.”¹³

For much of his first term in the 95th and 96th Congresses (1977–1981), Corrada-del Río defended Puerto Rico’s participation in federal social programs, standing firmly in the vanguard of what became the PNP’s standard policy in Washington: to convince Congress to

treat Puerto Rico as if it were a state, especially regarding appropriations for education, Social Security, and labor. He opposed any cuts in food stamps, arguing such a decision “flies in the face of equal justice under law,” particularly on “an island suffering the pains of a deep recession,” he said a month later.¹⁴ He championed bilingual education; sought to protect the benefits of disabled veterans living in U.S. territories; pushed to establish a minimum wage scale for Puerto Rico that was comparable to the mainland’s; and actively backed raising the budget for executive agencies that helped Puerto Rico’s rural communities, including the Farmers Home Administration, the Rural Electrification Administration, and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service.¹⁵

While only a handful of Corrada-del Río’s bills ever made it out of committee, his activism resonated well beyond the Beltway, and his participation in the national fabric of Hispanic political activism surpassed his predecessors’. “Hispanics,” he pointed out in 1979, “are becoming a force in almost every State and in almost every congressional district.”¹⁶ A founding member of the CHC, Corrada-del Río sought to reach an even broader audience by organizing the group Hispanic American Democrats (HAD).¹⁷ As with the CHC, Corrada-del Río used HAD to push for greater political leverage. “If we Hispanics are to make it in the United States we must obtain an entrance to the front door of the economic temple,” he said. “And that can hardly be arranged if we lack the political means, which is voter registration and the age-old practice of getting to the polls on voting day.”¹⁸

A large part of Corrada-del Río’s agenda concerned Puerto Rico’s education system. In 1979 he supported a bill to create the U.S. Department of Education, a cabinet-level agency, to oversee the quality of the nation’s schools and expand access to bilingual instruction “so that the high hopes ... engendered in the hearts and the minds of those who need it are not thwarted.”¹⁹ Corrada-del Río’s more notable successes included increasing federal funding for Puerto Rico’s schools by more than \$50 million and helping to augment the amount of money set aside by the government for college scholarships.²⁰



In the buildup to the 1980 election, party infighting threatened to undercut the PNP's control over the insular government and nearly cost Corrada-del Río a second term. He found himself an unwitting pariah after Puerto Rico's secretary of state refused to attend an honorary dinner with President James Earl (Jimmy) Carter because he objected to a proposed immigration measure that was somewhat controversial. News of the secretary's snub traveled quickly, and while most PNP officials supported the president's rebuke, Corrada-del Río feared it might undermine communication between San Juan and Pennsylvania Avenue.²¹ The Resident Commissioner publicly admonished the PNP administration for condoning the gesture, and while the party faithful responded in kind, Corrada-del Río tried to work past the criticism before Election Day.²² He stumped on his record in the House, taking credit for sustaining the island's public works programs and school system with federal money.²³ Corrada-del Río complained about his opponents' "negative and confusing" campaigns attacking him for creating a "dependence" on federal funding, or "a welfare mentality." "One of the biggest errors we hear is that federal aid breeds dependence," Corrada-del Río responded. "We maintain these funds have been a blessing, not a substitute for our own development."²⁴

Corrada-del Río won re-election by less than 1 percent in 1980, and ended up fighting many of the same battles he fought in his first term.²⁵ He was more vocal on the House Floor in his second term, fighting for access to food stamps and encouraging his colleagues to invest in the Caribbean Basin, even as the Ronald Reagan administration considered cutting billions from the national budget.²⁶ "Linked firmly to the U.S. economy, there is an axiom in our island that when Uncle Sam sneezes, Puerto Rico gets pneumonia," Corrada-del Río said in 1981.²⁷ In the scramble for federal aid, he warned that if the House targeted the island for block grants and across-the-board cuts—and it eventually did—Puerto Ricans would be singled out as "second class citizens ... not deserving of equal treatment."²⁸

With island unemployment still hovering above 20

percent, Corrada-del Río tried to help bolster the federal aid received by Puerto Rican sugar farmers, tuna canners, and rum sellers.²⁹ Hoping to protect both employers and employees, he took a firm stance on unauthorized labor, sponsoring an amendment to an unsuccessful immigration bill that required businesses to verify their employees' citizenship or face stiff penalties.³⁰ He also worked to extend unemployment benefits while backing the Job Training Partnership Act (H.R. 5320), which he described as a "comprehensive, coordinated approach to employment training," especially for underserved communities.³¹ He continued to push for broader access to bilingual education and sought to bolster Puerto Rico's food stamp program, as he had for the past seven years.³²

Corrada-del Río retired from the House at the end of the 98th Congress (1983–1985), opting not to run for re-election. Elected to serve Puerto Ricans, he took pride in promoting the concerns of Hispanic Americans throughout the United States.³³ The next year, Corrada-del Río was elected mayor of San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital and largest city, and served as the president of the PNP. In 1988 he waged an unsuccessful campaign for governor of Puerto Rico. Corrada-del Río was later appointed the island's secretary of state and eventually served as an associate justice on Puerto Rico's supreme court.³⁴ He has since retired from public service.

FOR FURTHER READING

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NOTES

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- 5 Henry L. Trehwitt, "Steamy Reception Looms for Ford at Puerto Rican Summit," 23 June 1976, *Baltimore Sun*: A3.
- 6 Baltasar Corrada to Denver Dickerson, Joint Committee on Printing, Congressional Directory Office, 23 November 1976, textual files of the *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*; William Claiborne, "Puerto Rican Officials Fear New Upswing of Terrorism," 25 March 1975, *Washington Post*: A4.
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- 14 *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (21 June 1977): 20150; *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (20 July 1977): 24090.
- 15 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (6 December 1977): 38632; *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (4 April 1977): 10330. See also *Congressional Record*, House, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (16 July 1979): 18765; Harry Turner, "Corrada 'Proud' of Helping P.R. Land U.S. Funds," 5 October 1980, *San Juan Star*: 6; "Corrada Asks P.R. Labor Force to Repudiate Torres' Wage Plan," 6 October 1980, *San Juan Star*: 8; *Congressional Record*, House, 95th Cong., 1st sess. (20 June 1977): 19802.
- 16 *Congressional Record*, Extension of Remarks, 96th Cong., 1st sess. (15 December 1979): 36371.
- 17 David Vidal, "Puerto Rico Aide Sees Statehood Hurt by Ford," 5 January 1977, *New York Times*: 12; "Hispanic Group Asks Carter for More Jobs," 2 March 1977, *New York Times*: 14.
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