

# POLITICS IN PERSPECTIVE

## INCREASING LATINO REPRESENTATION: SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FRONT LINE\*

*SENATOR ART TORRES†*

I want to begin by looking at Latino representation in California. In California we have an opportunity to increase our representation in the state legislature. However, with the new term limits I have very few years left as a legislator. Thus, I am looking at our future legislators, senators, congresspeople, and assemblypersons here in this room. Hopefully I can encourage you to become involved in the legislature. It does not pay a lot of money and it involves a lot of grief but it is tremendously rewarding in that it gives you an opportunity to pursue certain issues.

Today we have good representation in Los Angeles because of the efforts of former Assemblyman Richard Alatorre who helped put together the reapportionment plans of 1974 and 1982. Those plans provided us with a number of new assemblypersons, including a number of Latinas in the legislature who are providing leadership. We also have an opportunity to elect Cruz Bustamante, who is running for the Assembly in the San Joaquin Valley. This is the first time that we can elect anybody from that community. However, it will require a special effort to get him elected.

We are also making inroads throughout the state—in local school board elections, in city council elections, and in supervisory elections such as Gloria Molina's election here in Los Angeles. We have made important inroads and input into these local elections. In Congress, we now have Xavier Becerra, Lucille

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Roybal-Allard, Marty Martinez, and Esteban Torres. These representatives are clearly important but not enough. In the California State Senate, we only have three Senators: Senator Charles Calderon, Senator Ruben Ayala from San Bernardino, and myself. This is going to change. For example, with the shift in population we now have Assemblyman Joe Baca from the San Bernardino-Riverside area—an important development.

While our representation in California is growing, empowerment in terms of political power is not. As we all know, no one is going to hand us political power. We are going to have to take it and that requires us to compel change upon the institutions at the outset. Which institutions stifle our empowerment? The University of California (UC) system, the California State University (CSU) system, the community colleges, and now the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). In my opinion, these are going to be the front lines of our battles throughout the remainder of this century; education must be our number one priority. We are not graduating enough Latinos and Latinas from the universities of California.

Those of you who are CSU, UC, or community college students are statistical rarities. You exist as a blip somewhere on a statistical report. We cannot afford to have that phenomenon anymore. You are gems. Your responsibility as a gem, as a resource, is to reach out and touch base with other young people to get them involved in the university and educational system. The fight that I have been leading against increased fees is fundamentally about accessibility to higher education. If we cannot get into these schools because we cannot afford them, or because we cannot get into classes, what does it do to future generations? We are going to be in power very shortly in this state, if not in this whole southwestern region of the United States of America. That entails duties, responsibilities, and obligations. We want to make sure that we acquire the educational tools which will allow us to be at the forefront of advocacy and of intervention in higher education.

What is the battle over the break-up of the LAUSD all about? It is easy to be rhetorical and say: This district is too big; it is incompetent; it is inefficient. All of these statements may be correct. However, what underlies the discussion are ideas about race and ethnicity. We have to be honest about the underlying motives. It is not merely about cost efficiency or the people in the San Fernando Valley needing a voice. It is about race. It is the separate-but-equal argument. Those of you who are law students understand that that doctrine was thrown out years ago. Yet, it is alive and well in Southern California.

However, the fight to break-up the LAUSD is going to be based upon other issues. Twenty years ago, a bill was introduced by conservative Republican State Senator John Harmer to break up the LAUSD. That bill was vetoed by Ronald Reagan. I know that Ronald Reagan has probably forgotten that veto, like he has forgotten many other things he has done in his life, but he *did* veto that bill. Why did he veto it? It was not for civil rights reasons but because the breakup was "fiscally imprudent."

The discussion about breaking up the LAUSD relates directly to the quality of education we will receive. Our young people do not want to be bussed across the state. However, we have to bus because our schools are overcrowded. The people in the San Fernando Valley do not understand that once you break up the school district there are not going to be any children bussed to the San Fernando Valley. This means that schools in the San Fernando Valley will eventually have to close down since it will become costly and inefficient to keep them open without enough students. There are ways to improve the LAUSD; there are ways to make it more efficient, to make it more responsive to parents and neighborhoods. Is breaking up the school district the answer? No, if the motivation is racial imbalance or fear and insecurity among communities of people. These are all issues of empowerment and political development.

That brings me to my next point which is the issue of becoming leaders of healing. The most challenging confrontation for us as a community is determining how to become the leaders of healing. We, as a majority/minority group in this city, state, and, quickly approaching, this nation, must assume the responsibility of becoming healers. We have to begin to reach out to African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and other communities to begin the healing process of coalition. This is a sign of maturity and education. More than that, it is a sign of survival: how we get along with each other, how planning decisions are made, and how institutions respond to us will be dependent on our coalitional efforts. Therefore, the healing process has to begin with us.

Now we have someone in the White House who alleges that empowerment is important as long as you do not hire an undocumented taxpayer. We must continue to put pressure on the Clinton Administration to ensure the appointment of Latinos and Latinas to the federal bench, the Commission on Civil Rights, and other areas. We must make sure that we are not ignored again. We have waited twelve years to make up for the deficiencies of the Reagan-Bush era.

What must be done by this Administration to fulfill its promises of appointing members of minorities to political office? First, there must be appointments of Latinos/Latinas to the Federal Communications Commission, which determines how we are portrayed on television and in radio. Second, we must get appointments to the Civil Rights Commission so that we can have input into how we are treated within the institutions of government and society. Third, we need appointments in areas that affect us all, such as the Federal Trade Commission.

Willie Velasques, founder of the Southwest Voter Registration Project, said that when asked about the most important issues facing Hispanic America, he would respond: "The leadership will say, 'jobs, discrimination, and education.'" Yet every time that he conducted surveys in the Rio Grande Valley and asked the *Mejicanos* living in the valley about the most important issue facing Hispanic America, they would respond: "Water quality and community empowerment." We must begin to learn to fuse the leadership with emerging communities and the issues that are important to them. Placing Latinos on non-minority types of commissions is just as important as appointing a new chairperson for the Civil Rights Commission or creating a federal judgeship for a Latino or Latina. We want to be included and have a presence on all those boards and commissions where people have not seen us before. That must be our next agenda.

Another agenda I wish to discuss involves corporate America. What inroads are we making into corporate America? We have seen Peter Uberroth get to a very slow, shaky start on Rebuild L.A. Where is the rebuilding? Where is the effort? It took loud screams of "help" before it was decided that there was a need for Latinos and Latinas on the "board that would determine the future of Los Angeles." Why did we have to scream? It is because we do not have enough of our people in the top echelons of management in corporate California, least of all corporate America. I encourage all of you to look into business and become entrepreneurs. It is important to have business people and entrepreneurs representing our interests on the boards of directors of various corporations; they will have input and the ability to forge market patterns.

One day I sat down with Mr. Morita, the founder of Sony, and asked him, "Why aren't you advertising in Spanish telecommunications to remarket in California?" He asked, "Why do we need to do that? Our advertising hits across the board." I explained, "You do not understand. Latino-America today—and this was in 1991—has a spending power of 117 billion dollars." Not all Latinos communicate in English and people do not ask

whether you have a green card or not when it comes to paying taxes. Last year alone we spent 6.5 billion dollars on entertainment for our children and our families. Not only must we begin to make a place for Latinos in corporate America, but we must also pressure for responsiveness to the Latino market.

We are in a unique position today—still plagued by the history of discrimination but clearly in a position to do something about it.