

MUÑOZ MARIN AND THE ART OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

By: Pablo Francisco H.

Politics has been called the art of the possible.

For the art as usually practiced, that definition is fitting. But for those of us who have worked with Luis Muñoz Marín, politics in its finest sense is the art of the impossible. Few, if any, of his contemporaries around the world have surpassed him in challenging their constituencies with as bold, imaginative and humane a set of goals as those offered the voters of Puerto Rico. And of those leaders, if any, who may have surpassed him in breadth and scope of thought few, if any, have surpassed him in getting from their constituencies as positive and as activist a response as that given by the voters of Puerto Rico.

The United States, with the world's highest per capita income, has only lately come to grips with the fact that

the poverty and injustice suffered by millions of its citizens is a national disgrace. But three decades ago, in a country with one of the world's lowest per capita incomes, Muñoz Marín founded a political movement one of whose firmest propositions was that poverty of the body could be abolished. Puerto Rico is very close to eliminating that kind of poverty. But Muñoz recognized that the art of the impossible calls for more than that, and so he has been in the van of those who strive to abolish poverty of the mind and spirit.

To his detractors in the early years of the Popular Party, Muñoz probably looked like the hippies of today. (For the very young, let it be noted that those now called hippies used to be called bohemians). But there has always been an essential and decisive difference between those who practice the politics (or non-politics) of protest and those who strive to practice the art of the impossible.

"It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness," said the late Albert Schweitzer. "Why not do both?" asked Pablo Casals.

Muñoz does both. Had he only cursed the darkness, we would have today some collections of verse and prose with some very quotable lines. But because he lit candles while he cursed darkness, Puerto Rico has collections of programs, in law and in action, which have enabled her citizens to create a society that, if not ideal, offers scope for those who would pursue ideals.

"Operation Bootstrap" seems like a tired phrase to a younger generation who never knew the torture of swinging a machete in a shadeless field of sugar cane for six months a year and being unemployed the other six. But it still means economic development, that is, the right of every human being to life.

We can find another name for the kind of economic development program that Puerto Rico needs, but while the

framework of development will be more complex, more electronic, more automated, more computerized than in the past, the core of the effort will still have to be based on overcoming economic odds, on intensifying our efforts to keep abreast of the new science and technology -- and still being human instead of robots.

Puerto Rico now has a per capita income comparable to the incomes of countries of Western Europe and yet Western Europeans -- and Latin Americans as well -- are reading with avidity and alarm a book about the "management" advantage that has been achieved by the United States. Muñoz Marín, without ever having run a factory, knows that the production of wealth is a technique and that technology is dynamic and changing as never before. He knows that using wealth is an art and he has tried to make this art an effective servant of public policy.

The art of the impossible, of course, requires a rare combination of charisma, intelligence, energy and imagination. The fact that Muñoz Marín has all of them in generous measure does not make him irreplaceable but does make things difficult for his successors. For alas--no, not alas, fortunately, in politics, probably more than in any other sphere of human activity, leaders cannot "groom" successors. They can teach, for to govern is to educate and to govern well is to educate wisely. But in the final analysis successors must teach themselves. They must understand that education is a lifelong process that requires one to learn from the past while always breaking ground along new frontiers of the mind and spirit. And it is especially important for successors and their constituents to realize that charisma -- the "quality of extraordinary spiritual power attributed to a person capable of eliciting popular support in the direction of human affairs" -- is non-transferable.

We hear much glib talk these days about the generation gap. But the generation gap is often more a matter of style than of ideas and talent. "Now I am old my teachers are the young... I go to school to youth to learn the future," wrote Robert Frost. He didn't mean, however, that tenderness of years and stridency of tone are an automatic substitute for wisdom.

So to those who worry about the generation gap, I offer the challenge implicit in the art of the impossible: light candles while you curse the darkness. And strive every day to out-think men of the caliber of Muñoz Marín. Out-think them politically, economically, socially and spiritually. Anyone with charisma who can successfully tackle all four -- to concentrate on only one aspect is useless -- will find himself needed by society and winning elections in Puerto Rico, or New York City, or anywhere that the road to the ballot box is open to free men.