

“Citizenship and Representation among the Portuguese in America”

by

Frank F. Sousa

Recently, on April 11, 2008, the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture and the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives organized a colloquium, “Citizenship and Representation: Conversations with Portuguese-American Elected Officials,” co-sponsored by the Edmund Dinis Portuguese-American Political, Legal and Public Service Collection. The aim of the meeting, which brought together Congressman Devin Nunes, of California, and seven state-level elected officials from Massachusetts and Rhode Island, was to explore issues related to political participation among the Portuguese in America.

The context was, in part, a study from more than 30 years ago, by anthropologist Estellie Smith, which dubbed the Portuguese in Massachusetts the “Invisible Minority.” Despite their considerable numbers and a long presence in America (since the days of whaling) the Portuguese—not only in New England but in other states where they had settled—had indeed frequently gone unnoticed, a true “invisible minority.” This invisibility and consequent lack of a voice had been greatly detrimental in a society like ours that values civic participation and a strong public image. But no less a reason for the colloquium—which is part of a year long series on citizenship and representation among the Portuguese in America—was to celebrate the fact that, more recently, the Portuguese have, indeed, attained greater visibility. In business, the Portuguese are building greater wealth and opportunities than ever before. In literature, we are witnessing a renaissance in Portuguese-American letters, with several nationally recognized writers, like Katherine Vaz and Frank Gaspar, who have produced compelling works of imaginative literature about the Portuguese-American experience. A thriving ethnic museum in San Jose, California, the development of the Ferreira-Mendes Portuguese-American Archives at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, and the projected Azorean Whaleman Gallery in the New Bedford Whaling Museum, among other such initiatives, also call attention to a community gaining greater prominence, by institutionalizing and mainstreaming its cultural memory. In politics, the Portuguese are represented at the national level by three congressmen; regionally, by senators and representatives in RI whose number reflect the percentages of Portuguese inhabitants in that state; in the Massachusetts South Coast, the Portuguese are also well represented by state-level elected officials; and at the local level, by the mayor of Fall River as well as membership on city councils, school committees, etc, in numbers rarely if ever seen.

Today’s Portuguese-American elected officials follow in the footsteps of others who broke barriers many years ago: The first Portuguese-American in Congress, Antonio Joseph, son of immigrants from Saint Michael, was New Mexico's territorial representative, from 1885 to 1895; Congressmen Tony Coelho, assistant majority whip visited the region to garner support in the Portuguese-American community; and Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell’s mother was Azorean. Closer to home, Jacinto F. Diniz, an immigrant from Saint Michael, was the first Portuguese in the Massachusetts State House

of Representatives (1940-1949), having been a candidate for U.S. Representative from Massachusetts in 1948. His son, Edmund Dinis, owner of WJFD Radio, was also a successful public official, as a state representative and senator and then district attorney of Bristol County. Mary Fonseca was the first woman of Portuguese-American descent to be elected a state senator, and the first woman to hold a leadership position in the state Senate.

There is little doubt that political representation has a wider impact on things Portuguese-American, as one example will illustrate: Rep. Robert Correia, in partnership with Reps. Antonio Cabral and Michael Rodrigues and Senator Marc Pacheco, secured a state earmark for the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture for many years and that, coupled with considerable support from the Luso-American Foundation and several Portuguese-American business people, allowed us to create the center in 1996, the Department of Portuguese in 2000, the Hélio and Amélia Pedroso/Luso-American Foundation Endowed Chair in Portuguese Studies, in 2001; the MA in Portuguese in 2004, the Ferreira-Mendes Archives Endowment in 2005, the doctoral program in 2007, in addition to publishing several books a year, while organizing art exhibits, theatrical performances, and conferences. Hopefully their example can be useful to the folks promoting a fledgling program in Portuguese at RI College.

Notwithstanding the successes of the community, many challenges remain, as the speakers at the recent colloquium maintained. Nowhere are the effects of decades of invisibility and silence more poignantly expressed than in the fact that of more than 400 judges in the Commonwealth only two are of Portuguese ancestry, as Chief Justice Phillip Rapoza of the Massachusetts Appeals Court pointed out along with accompanying reasons for this deficit. And though regionally the Portuguese are reasonably well represented, they continue to be very much under-represented at the State's higher echelons, as Clyde Barrow's research at the Center for Policy Analysis suggests. Although James McGlinchey's research and the grassroots organization of the Portuguese-American Citizenship Project indicate that the Portuguese are voting more frequently when registered to vote, much remains to be done in the area of voter registration and citizenship drives. Beyond positive voting trends, the Portuguese still seem to participate in the political process less assiduously than other groups in following campaigns closely, volunteering to work for candidates and donating money. This may in part explain why those in positions of power do not generally regard the Portuguese as politically influential, making it less likely that they will address the community's concerns, such as better Portuguese representation on the judiciary. Similarly, the lesser degree of Portuguese participation in the political process has traditionally prevented the community, at least up to now, from doing anything about the kind of state gerrymandering that has divided and diluted its vote in the South Coast into three congressional districts, as Edmund Dinis argued at the colloquium.

By bringing together Portuguese-American elected representatives, scholars and grassroots organizers from across the country in an academic forum to discuss social, economic, political and leadership issues related to the various Portuguese communities throughout the United States, the University hopes to promote a network of people working together to increase participatory citizenship and representation of this important ethnic group. In this way, the Portuguese will more fully and actively contribute to

American democracy. (For more information on the colloquium, including texts of the presentations, visit www.portstudies.umassd.edu.)

Frank F. Sousa is Professor of Portuguese, Director of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture and General Editor of the Portuguese in the Americas Book Series at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.