

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

Oops! There went a "C" day, and this time even I forgot to give it a mention. This one was Citizenship Day, on November 4th, and a government holiday. There's also Commonwealth, Covenant and Constitution Day - government holidays all. There's a rumor that the Legislature is thinking of making All Soul's Day a government holiday as well. While that would seem to make a lot of sense - so many people take time from work that day as it is - I'd support it only if an existing government holiday were dropped. The government doesn't need MORE paid holidays burdening its budget.

My suggestion - and I'm sure I'm not the first to come up with the idea - is to combine the four "C" holidays into one day off, and take one of the left-over "C" days for the All Soul's Day holiday. That would still leave the government with two less holidays - a big savings much needed in today's economy.

One could argue about which day to make the prime "C" day, I suppose, though to me it seems pretty obvious that the most significant, most important one is Covenant Day. That was the beginning, the first step. The Covenant laid the groundwork for all that followed, for the occasion of all the other "C" days. Commonwealth status, the CNMI Constitution, citizenship, all were provided for in the Covenant.

Combining the four "C" days into one might also encourage more regular, organized, appropriate observation of those four significant events. With only one day to focus on, it might be easier to re-institute something along the lines of the Covenant Forum that was so successful a few years ago.

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Dominating most people's thoughts at the moment no doubt is tomorrow - not a "C" day, but Election Day. I wonder whether it really is due to the state of the economy, or just a difference in operational style with the new director, that this year there seems less information available about who and what will be on the ballot than usual. Isn't there usually a specimen of the ballot printed in the paper? This year, seems one has to go to the Election Board to get a copy.

Though there are observers who seem to feel at least some of the outcomes are pretty obvious, I'm sure not ready to bet on any of them. Will Marian Aldan's belated attempt to influence the vote on the Article XII issue be any more successful than the attempt made by S.M.A.R.T. during the 3rd Concon? Will Willie Tan's man really be (re-)elected to the House? Or will people in his district be among those identified as today's more "mature" voters, and decide that they are not willing to give a tycoon even more influence than he already has - no matter how much money he's given away trying to buy yet more votes and influence? Will any "reform" candidates win election? Will common sense prevail, and the initiative establishing three government finance departments be defeated? Is there any chance casino gambling will be defeated on Rota? Is there a chance the "reform" casino bill on Tinian won't pass?

The Tinian and Rota initiatives require approval by two-thirds of the persons from the respective senatorial districts who are eligible to vote. On the other hand, to be ratified, the two proposed Constitutional amendments simply require approval by a majority of the votes cast, since in this case, they were both proposed by legislative initiative.

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While most eyes are focused elsewhere is probably the best time to introduce an unpopular and highly controversial idea - few will notice, or pay attention, but the seed will have been planted. So here goes. It's about time serious thought were given to abolishing - or at the very least, drastically revising - the CNMI homestead law. There's less and less public land left in the CNMI, and yet the number of people eligible for homesteads under the existing law grows and grows. Pretty soon, there's not going to be any land left. Then what?

The Northern Islands are all public land, but opening them to homesteading will be difficult. There are few good harbors in the Northern Islands, through which to bring in equipment, supplies, people. To provide the necessary infrastructure required to support homesteads - from roads to schools to potable water and power - will be prohibitively expensive. And there's not much usable land anyway - most of it is steep and mountainous - not to mention the still active volcanoes.

Moreover, not all of the public land now still available should be used for residential homesteads.

Some must be preserved for agricultural homesteads, to offset the high cost of importing food to the CNMI. Some should be left for conservation, to preserve endangered species, to simply provide green space. Some is needed to protect watersheds. There's also the matter of land exchanges, but more on that later.

The homestead concept was apparently introduced in the CNMI by the Germans, who offered homestead lots to settlers, primarily from Guam and Germany, in an attempt to increase the population of the CNMI. In the U.S. mainland, homestead programs were used as a means of encouraging people to settle in the newly acquired western parts of what is now the U.S. Land was seen as being nearly limitless, and it was, relative to the size of the population at that time.

When the current homestead program was begun in the CNMI, the same was probably thought true: the amount of public land available seemed limitless, relative to the size of the population at the time. It's unfortunate, but probably not surprising, that no one at the time could imagine that the CNMI would develop as much and as quickly as it has, and that no one, therefore, put any limit, or time-line, to the homestead program.

But it's clear that the time has come. The homestead program should probably be stopped altogether. The younger generations will have to do with what land still is owned by their families, or rent or buy in the private sector on the open market. This might, in fact, create a rather active real estate market, which in turn could be a boon to the economy.

It has already been suggested that one way to continue the homestead program would be to offer ownership of condominium units instead. But that would only serve to postpone the issue.

Whatever path is taken, and surely one must be decided upon sooner rather than later, the first thing that needs to be done is change the way people think about what little public land remains. Normally, when there is a scarcity, the price for that commodity goes up. That has never happened in the CNMI in regard to its public land. The price for public land - whether used in land exchanges or in leases to developers - has been consistently and grossly undervalued. This use of public land, cheaply priced, as inducement to developers, or in exchange for road rights, wetlands, must be stopped. Instead, the remaining land still in government hands should be priced at a premium. After all, it is a vanishing resource. When it is gone, there is no more. So what's left should be thought of and treated as a rare and precious commodity.

The difficult decision will be where, at what point in time, to stop the homestead program. . Given the finiteness of the available land, and the need for other applications of that land perhaps not even all the already identified homestead areas should be developed. A useful first step might be to declare a moratorium on all homestead programs and projects until the situation is studied, and some recommendations for dealing with the problem have been formulated.

There's no denying that it is a very controversial issue, and a very emotional one. But it's also a very real problem, and the sooner something is done about it, the better for all concerned.

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Is there a lawyer in the family? One has to wonder about Senator Pete P. Reyes' "shoot-from-the-hip" response to the PCB situation in Tanapag, which, according to the <I>Tribune</I>, at least, was to demand that the CNMI sue the military.

Certainly, the federal government should be held responsible for cleaning up contamination it has caused, and for providing medical assistance to those affected. But is a suit really necessary? And is it really the best solution? I don't think so.

In the first placed, responsibility for the contamination has already been admitted by the federal government. It has already begun taking steps to solve the problem. Maybe not as fast, or as extensively, as one would like, but responsibility has already been admitted, acknowledged. Secondly, one has but to look at the situation in the Marshalls, where forty years later, there is still on-going litigation about who is going to get how much in the way of compensation for health problems related to A-bomb testing there. Is that what we want - forty years of costly litigation?

There hasn't even been an attempt to discuss, to negotiate, to resolve the issue of health care, and already the CNMI should sue? The Senator must have a hungry lawyer in his family looking for a cause. Otherwise, that attitude just doesn't make a lot of sense.....