

On My Mind  
11/10/00

So - was the outcome of last week's election a measure of the CNMI's political maturity? On the one hand, the answer could be a resounding "yes!" The winning team of Juan N. Babauta and Diego T. Benavente certainly had far fewer resources to draw from than did the losing team of Jesus R. Sablan and Thomas P. Villagomez. So their victory could be interpreted as saying that the voters have matured enough to support the principle that money does not buy everything - that other values are more important.

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On the other hand, there is the speculation that it was Democrats voting, in this open primary, for what they conceived as the weaker ticket against their party's candidate that gave the Babauta-Benavente team its victory. For what it's worth, that theory even made it into one of the papers, in a by-lined opinion column.

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If the Babauta-Benavente team were to win next November, in the face of a promised third-party candidate - and there's talk of even a fourth "independent" candidate making an appearance - the evidence would be all the stronger that the electorate has indeed matured. Not in age, it should be pointed out - for it would appear that many of the Babauta-Benavente supporters came from younger voters - but in point of view.

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If ever there was need of proof of the <I>Pacific Daily News</I>'s parochial point of view, its coverage of the CNMI's Republican primary offered incontrovertible evidence.

The <I>PDN</I> gave the story all of 3 inches - buried on page 8 of its Tuesday issue. Tut, tut.

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Now, there's an interesting development. The extensive health survey given Tanapag residents indicated that only 17 of the more than 1000 residents tested showed levels of pcb contamination above the average - and not so far above at that. Yet Tanapag residents are convinced that something is wrong in their village - that some unknown substance is causing a level and type of illness not found elsewhere.

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The next step, it seems to me, is to examine that hypothesis more closely. The CNMI exists in a rather self-contained environment. It is separated from other people, other lands, other societies by vast amounts of ocean. In many ways, what happens in those other lands, and other societies, is only marginally known, marginally significant to the people of the CNMI. This is particularly true in the area of health concerns.

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The people of the CNMI do not generally, or often, compare themselves with people in other areas in terms of their health, the types of illnesses from which they suffer, the extent of illnesses among them, the impact of lifestyles on their life expectancy and the like. Until now, such information has not had much importance or meaning for them.

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But sources have said that the pattern of illnesses in Tanapag may not be as unique as the villagers have believed it to be. So it would make sense, it seems to me, to begin to do some comparisons with similar-sized communities, with communities of similar life styles, or among people with similar incidences of high blood pressure, diabetes, obesity.

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In any case, DPH Secretary Joe Villagomez deserves a huge vote of thanks for having insisted that the villagers get as thorough a health check-up (unlike any given any other village in the CNMI) as they did, and for agreeing to pursue the concerns the villagers have raised.

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The papers have been carrying notice of a public hearing on the question of providing protection for three endangered species of small trees or shrubs on Rota. At first glance, the natural reaction might well be to wonder why these plants deserve special consideration. There must be hundreds, if not thousands, of different kinds of small trees and shrubs on earth. What difference does one, or two, or three less kinds make?

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Perhaps the strongest argument is that without a thorough test of those plants, it is not known whether one of them will perhaps turn out to contain some life-giving substance or other that is necessary to the control of some disease that now exists, or that may develop in the future. If the plants disappear, so does the hope of the cure they could provide. Preserving a species for that reason alone would seem justifiable.

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A more theoretical argument is that diversity is important to the health of our environment. The fewer options available to birds, or insects, or livestock for food, as nesting material, as resting place, the more endangered those birds, insects and livestock become. A disease, a fire, a typhoon, an earthquake, pests, or man-made chemicals could wipe out normal stocks of plant material. If diversity is not maintained, there will be no alternative options. Preserving a species for the sake of preserving diversity is also justifiable.

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An alternative apparently not under consideration as part of the proposal to designate these plants as endangered species is to collect seeds or cuttings and planting more of them as protection against their disappearance rather than merely designating them as endangered species.

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The 11/6 issue of the <I>Variety</I>, on page 8, carries an article spelling out the details of the time and place for the hearing, which is to be held on Rota on November 16, and addresses to which comments may be sent. A formal announcement of the hearing appeared on page 71 in the 11/2 issue of the <I>PDN</I>.

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Will political maturity prevail in the Gore/Bush muddle? Unfortunately, it doesn't look that way. The press is well on its way to making this yet another "feeding frenzy" where every gesture, every word, every angle, every possibility, nuance, suggestion, will be reported on in

painful detail, where endless speculation will fill the op-ed pages and by-lined columns, and where unsolicited advice, shallow thinking and thoughtless quotes from every by-stander will dominate the media.

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It requires great self-control to keep such a situation - particularly given what is at stake - as dignified, decorous, as it should be, to fend off the intrusive, invasive presence of the media, to restrain the rhetoric and to maintain mutual respect. Yet the press has already noted that Bush missed a chance to be statesmanlike - since he did not offer support and cooperation - as he could have - given that the focus of the issue lies with Florida, the state his brother governs.

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On a broader scale, the U.S. electorate, though, has shown political maturity. As a regular reader of this column has observed, "... in other countries and other times, this kind of close call would result either in the current administration declaring a state of emergency and running things forever, or rioting roving thru the streets. As they say, only in America!"

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Island politics have made for the proverbial "interesting times." What a gift that national politics have now made it possible for me to live in, observe and experience truly history-making times as well!

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Local media doesn't get as frenzied, thank goodness. But it does its bit by garbling its message on occasion. Some recent gems: "...overspeeding drivers..." "...slam open the floodgates..." "Years ago most of us had fainted hopes when....." A restaurant will be "permanently closed for good." The CNMI "economy has been persistently rallying weakly." The event "opened a box of Pandoras." Isn't the power of the word wonderful?