

On My Mind
11/17/00

Ten days later and the outcome of the presidential election still has not been determined. Who would have thought that a U.S. election could be such a cliff-hanger? The reaction being reported from some foreign sources - that the delay in and uncertainty of the outcome reflect a weakness in the democratic system - is disturbing. On the contrary, the peace that prevails, the orderliness that continues, speaks to the strength of the American democratic system. The stock market may bounce back and forth, but government continues to function as before.

Bush's rush to the courts to prevent re-counts and try hold his lead does not speak well for his potential role as judicious leader of the people. The lack of statesmanship is disappointing, to say the least. Given that he has refused to acknowledge - in any way - that it is the votes in his brother's state that are at issue makes it even worse.

At this point, it is pretty self-evident that the major lesson to be learned from this whole spectacle is the importance of every single vote cast. There is probably no reliable way of determining how many eligible voters did not cast their ballots, and how they would have cast them if they had voted, but it sure makes for some interesting speculations. Are there voters out there castigating themselves for not having voted? That would be a novelty - but a well-deserved lesson.

Another equally obvious lesson, it seems to me, is that many election commissions are in need of serious reform. More than a few would appear to have gotten very sloppy out there in ensuring and enforcing the right of every qualified voter to cast a valid ballot. It's no secret that voter irregularities of one sort or another are widespread. But the variety and extent of those irregularities have been rather revealing. One would hope that Florida's powers-that-be, and those in the other states where such irregularities have been exposed, will make certain that such problems do not rise again.

Perhaps this election will also be the death-knell for the archaic electoral college. That in itself would almost make the circus worthwhile.

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Once again, the needs and interests of the locals have been pushed aside in favor of perceived needs of the tourism industry. This time, it's the Commonwealth Ports Authority, which has moved one of the two commuter airlines' arrival and departure gates from the commuter terminal to the airport's main terminal - allegedly at the request of tourism agents - for the convenience of the tourists.

But what it means for the locals is that even a day trip to Tinian now becomes more arduous and time consuming if not expensive. Parking in the commuter terminal (theoretically not allowed) means a longer hike to get to the plane; departing from the main terminal requires an earlier check-in, "legal" parking in the paid parking lot adds \$8-\$10 to the cost of each trip. Ironically,

many of those making day trips to Tinian are government workers, which means they'll add the parking fee to their travel expense claim, and it is their government agency that will, as a result, be paying CPA (another government agency) for the parking fees of their employees.

What's worse is that there is now talk of levying a fee for parking at the commuter terminal, because, it is alleged, too many people were trying to avoid the main terminal parking fees by parking in the commuter lot. How user-unfriendly can a government agency get?

CPA's efforts to find alternative income sources in the face of a decrease in revenue brought about by the slowed economy have been quite interesting - CPA seems to have succeeded in attaching a charge to every single service it provides the general public. It has, moreover, done so in the most heavy-handed, self-serving and inconsiderate manner imaginable.

It is unreasonable to demand that people pay a dollar just to drive up and pick up friends and family at the air- or seaport. It is unreasonable to demand that people pay \$30 to spend a week-end on Tinian, Rota or Guam. It is unreasonable to demand that people pay \$10 to make a day trip to Tinian by boat or air. CPA has even done away with the much less expensive long-term parking lot it once operated.

Much more reasonable would be not to charge anything for periods of less than an hour. To charge a maximum of \$5/day. To charge a maximum of \$10 over a week-end. To establish a more reasonable minimum for a week's absence. There's even a chance, with lowered fees, that more people would be willing to pay them, and the net loss to CPA would not be all that large. And it would certainly enhance the image of and promote good-will towards that agency.

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Another government agency that appears more concerned with its own welfare rather than that of the people of the Commonwealth is Northern Marianas College, which is insisting that it should be the one to determine who else is allowed to offer post-secondary education in the CNMI, and in what form. Can anyone argue that that is not a conflict of interest?

Obviously, NMC does not support the establishment of other post-secondary institutions on island, for fear that NMC might lose students and teachers and maybe even legislative and community support to such other institutions. Yet, as all but the most narrow of thinkers would have to acknowledge, no single institution can offer all the options that post-secondary education can provide, from life-long learning, home-making and vocational skills to technical and academic career paths in everything from accounting to veterinary medicine.

In the meantime, NMC dilutes its programs further and further, vainly trying to meet all the demands on its own. Not content with the natural and worthy function of serving as a true community college for the CNMI, NMC does not even include "community" in its name. Yet now it is striving to become a full-fledged four-year college.

Even the argument that the CNMI is not ready to handle an increase in foreign students is

suspect. Foreign students' impact on the infrastructure would be no more than that made by an equal number of tourists, or foreign workers. Nor is it all that clear why it would be so much more burdensome to keep track of foreign students than it would foreign workers. Income to the CNMI from an increase in foreign students would come from the resources required to house the students and their teachers and the classrooms, from the materials and supplies - including food-stuffs - for the students, teachers and support staff, from the increase in travel and accommodation for not only those directly involved with the school, but also the families of all those involved.

The Legislature should create an autonomous body, similar to the professional licensing board, perhaps, that would draw up standards, criteria and procedures for the establishment of additional post-secondary educational institutions in the CNMI. It should not be left up to NMC to do so.

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Administrators and policy-makers of the Public School System as well as NMC administrators and policy-makers - and legislators - might find of interest the October issue of Father Fran Hezel's <I>Micronesian Counselor.</I> The issue is entitled, "What should our schools be doing?"

Hezel explains that the answer to what education can do, what its purpose is, can be divided into three general areas: to provide manpower training, to provide academic skills, to support cultural preservation. In looking at which students might fall into each of these categories, Hezel warns that the usual way of doing so no longer works. At one time, manpower training would have been aimed primarily at school drop-outs who were expected to remain in their home village or island; academic skills would have been aimed at brighter students, who were expected to leave island to pursue career education, and cultural customs and beliefs would have been taught at home, not in the schools.

Today, this view no longer works, argues Hezel, which, in turn raises many questions as to what schools should really be teaching: strong work ethics? the local language? English? mechanics or carpentry? start-up business skills?

His paper - the first of three in a series written with PREL (Pacific Resources for Education and Learning) support - concludes that one mode of education can not meet all needs. But in making the necessary adaptations, he says, basic survival skills - giving students what they need to make their own way in the future - must not be sacrificed.

Information on this and other forum discussions can be found at

<http://www.micsem.org/edu.htm>.