

On My Mind

2/16/01

Earlier this week, the <I>Variety</I>'s front-page featured a story about a petition being circulated island-wide in an effort to gather support for Tanapag villagers' position that all PCB-contaminated soil found in the village be shipped off-island. Though I live in the village, I may not be asked to sign the petition (due, in part, to my being viewed as too outspoken), but even if I were, I would not do so.

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It isn't that I don't agree with the sentiment behind the petition. PCBs are a known hazardous substance, and have been shown to be carcinogenic. I don't want them in the neighborhood either. Maybe shipping all 20,000 tons to the states that have been excavated from village sites to date - and the additional tons still to be excavated - is the best way to get rid of the PCBs. But all the facts are not in. And I don't believe in taking uninformed action, when it can be avoided.

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), in charge of cleaning up the PCB-contaminated sites in the village, has initiated a study to determine the most cost-effective way of handling those 20,000+ tons of soil. The process of treating the soil involves two steps: (1) stripping the PCB's from the soil - leaving clean soil - and then (2) treating or disposing of the PCB-contaminated residual. In its simplest terms, the available options are to strip the soil on-island, or to ship the soil off island, and let someone else worry about what happens to the soil. There are, of course, "sub-options:" what treatment method to use if the soil is stripped on-island; whether to treat the residuals on-island or ship them off-island; and if they are to be treated on-island, by what method.

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To strip the soil of contaminants on-island would involve shipping equipment to the CNMI for whatever method will be used to strip the soil, assembling the equipment on-site, and transporting and housing the crew that will carry out the stripping process. Whether that would really be cheaper than just shipping the soil, bulky and heavy as it is, off-island has not yet been determined. That - as well as various treatment options - is presumably what the ACE study is now investigating.

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Once the ACE study is complete, its recommendations will be reviewed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The study will also be opened for public comment; the EPA comments will also be made available to the public.

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Until that study - together with the EPA comments - has been released, I don't feel I have enough information to come to an intelligent conclusion as to whether the soil should be shipped off-island or not. That should be time enough to raise questions, take a stand, circulate petitions if necessary. At least then it will be an informed discussion.

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To do otherwise, to ignore and circumvent a formal process that is in place and that is underway, strikes me as an action as lawless, in a way, as was the ouster of President Estrada of the Philippines. The Philippine constitution provides for impeachment of a president. There is a formal process in place, in other words, and it was underway. But the people of the Philippines chose

to ignore their constitution, setting a dangerous precedent.

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Ignoring the procedure in place and underway for determining what to do about the PCB-contaminated soil in Tanapag village also sets a dangerous precedent.

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It's been common knowledge that the two industries, other than tourism, and - heaven help us, the garment industry - that the CNMI should undertake in order to diversify its economy are fishing and agriculture. Yet not much has materialized in either area. There is a farming industry of sorts - as the various trucks selling fruit and vegetables in front of the garment workers' barracks and the various farmers' markets testify. But problems of land holdings, land use management, and the inevitable typhoons, among other things, have kept agriculture from growing into a significant element in the over-all economy.

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There's even less action on the "fishing" front. And here, I would suggest, the problem might well be one of semantics. It's not really fishing that is appropriate as an island industry, as an enticing career opportunity to our youth, but marine science. Our ocean surroundings offer jobs - and economic growth potential - in far more than just the fish out there. Marine science includes the study of ocean currents, the make-up of the ocean floor, underwater volcanoes, the behavior of ocean mammals as well as fish, migration patterns, the value of algae as medicine, design and development of marine parks, shoreline erosion, conservation, fisheries management, coral growth and responsible harvesting, the science and politics of marine policy - and that's just a sampling.

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In looking at whether additional, or alternate, post-secondary institutions have a place here in the CNMI, one of the factors to consider might be the extent to which marine sciences have ever or are now being offered at the post-secondary level. To the best of my knowledge, the answer is that the offerings have been sporadic at best - with a course or two taught now or then, but never in a coherent fashion leading to a possible career in the field.

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And given the fact that this is an island country, that is pretty amazing. The oceans cover nearly three-quarters of the earth's surface. They represent wealth and resources that have hardly begun to be tapped, but on the other hand, they have been abused and misused to an alarming degree. Just as one would expect every islander to know how to swim, one would expect island schools to focus on the oceans that surround them, and to promote an understanding of, and the care and nurture of that immense natural resource. Yet here that has not happened.

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There are other areas where present post-secondary education offerings are lacking as well. The past virtually exclusive focus on training teachers and nurses has served to severely limit the career choice available to island students. Limited in the financial aid available to them unless they attend NMC for their first two years, few students have been able to successfully pursue careers in other fields.

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Does the CNMI need more versatility, diversity, in its post-secondary institutions? Absolutely.

Should criteria, performance standards be set for other post-secondary institutions? Absolutely. Should those standards be administered by NMC? Absolutely NOT. Only an independent body can ensure impartiality.

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While too many task forces can impede, rather than facilitate, progress, there's one area where I think a task force may be the only answer, and that is on the issue of off-island travel. In but the most recent example of the foggy thinking surrounding off-island trips, the legislature has jumped on the Saipan mayor, according to recent media accounts, accusing him of taking too many off-island trips. From the sounds of it, the legislators have not stopped to find out where the mayor went, what the purpose of the trips was, or what may have been accomplished by taking them. They have gotten upset at the fact that the sum spent seemed too high.

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As the legislators themselves should know, there are junkets, and then there are non-junkets - worthwhile trips that do bring new insights, new knowledge, new and useful contacts, valuable strengthening of relationships. Off-island trips are not, as and of themselves, a bad thing, and they should not be categorically condemned.

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Apparently what is needed is a set of criteria for determining the usefulness, the value, of any given off-island trip. Rough criteria no doubt exist in some agencies for approving off-island travel, but what would seem more useful would be some generalized parameters, for application across government, as to what constitutes a non-junket. And the best way to arrive at those generalized parameters might be to gather input from a variety of government and non-government personnel through the mechanism of a task force. Governor, are you listening?

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What bothers me most about the on-going battle of the "smoking guns" is not so much the particulars being alleged against the present nominee for trial court judge as it is the patent hypocrisy in considering the present nominee at all. Another attorney was nominated for the position who is at least as qualified for judgeship as is the present nominee. Yet his candidacy was dismissed out of hand - because he was not local.

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If a non-local is acceptable after all, it is only fair that the first candidate be re-considered, even if it requires a change in the law. To do otherwise is capricious, discriminatory, disgraceful.