

On My Mind

6/1/01

What a cliff-hanger the fight for dominance of the U.S. Senate has become! How long will the new alignment: 50 Democrats, 49 Republicans, 1 Independent, last? Will the Republicans find a Democrat willing to join their side? Will more moderate Republicans follow Jefford and leave the party? Only time will tell.

But what a relief it is, at the moment! The Arctic Preserve, safe from drilling. The highly problematical new space initiative, on the shelf. A conservatively packed Supreme Court, out of the question. The faith-based initiative, reined in.

The shift in the Senate could pose problems for the CNMI, since it is the Democrats who support federal control over labor and immigration in the CNMI, but so long as the House is still Republican, all is not yet lost.

It is astounding how much difference a single act by just one person can make. Jefford's decision to leave the Republican Party has enormous national, as well as international worldwide implications. If the Arctic Preserve isn't breached, more emphasis will likely be put on energy conservation. By cutting back on oil consumption, pollution - and the ozone hole - will, hopefully, decrease more quickly. If the new space armament scheme is dropped, not only will billions of dollars be available for education and other social programs, but neither will the sanctity of space be violated. With the Republicans no longer dominating the Senate, the separation of state and church will remain more distinct.

That a single deed has such huge ramifications is also heart-warming, encouraging, inspirational.

All too often, we wonder how much difference the actions of a single human being can possibly make in a world populated by several billion people. Jefford's switch is a wonderful example of how one act can set off ripples that literally reach around the world. We should all be grateful to the junior Senator from Vermont.

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It received only a tiny notice in the <I>Pacific Daily News</I>, and none in the local papers, but a conference scheduled to be held in Guam two weeks from now is full of sessions that might be of interest to any number of individuals and government agency personnel here in the CNMI. Besides, it's free! There's no registration fee involved.

Co-sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Guam Environmental Protection Agency, the 20th Annual Pacific Islands Environment Conference will take place on Guam from June 11-15 at the Hyatt Regency Guam. This year's theme: "Whose Business is the Environment? Sustaining Our Pacific Island Resources."

One of the feature presentations will occur on Tuesday, when guest speaker David Schaller of U.S. E.P.A. Region 8 will speak on fuel cell technology as an alternative to the present depen-

dence on carbon fuels. According to the program, which can be found on the web at www.gepa.gov.gu/conference/agenda2.html, his talk will not only provide an explanation of what fuel cell technology is, but also describe the current status of its development, and its implications for economic and environmental opportunities for island nations.

Among the environmental issues to be discussed during the week-long conference are pollution prevention, wetlands and wetland regulation, hazardous waste treatment, water and waste water management, and regional re-cycling. U.S. E.P.A, Army Corps of Engineers, and South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) officials are among those scheduled to make presentations, as well as speakers from Saipan, Hawaii, American Samoa, Kosrae, Palau and, of course, both private sector and government officials from Guam.

The program is arranged so that all presentations on the same topic are given on the same day, allowing those interested in only one of the topics to attend only on the day that topic is featured.

For those interested in more than one topic, concurrent sessions can make choices difficult, but it should be possible to switchback and forth between topics.

In any event, a good opportunity to learn what others are doing, to meet or renew acquaintances with others involved in the same area, and to share information.

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From all appearances there is a huge loop-hole in procedures for monitoring the adequacy of foreign worker housing. Standards for the amount of space allotted each worker have been established, and are under the jurisdiction of the CNMI's Division of Labor within the Department of Labor and Immigration (DOLI). However, from what I've been told so far, Labor only inspects housing facilities if requested by the employer. Generally speaking, it does not inspect where no employer request has been received.

L&T companies have filed a Coastal Resource Management Office (CRMO) permit application to convert a warehouse into barracks for 200 workers. CRMO regulations have no specific requirements regarding adequacy of space for barracks residents. The CRMO permit process does not include review by the Department of Labor and Immigration. There is no procedure for either agency to check with the other on this - or, apparently, any other issue. So conceivably, the CRMO could approve L&T's application, even if housing standards set by DOLI were not met. And with CRMO approval, why would L&T feel it necessary to also obtain DOLI approval? Result: potential violation of housing standards resulting in possible abuse of garment workers, and more claims that the CNMI must indeed be brought under federal labor and immigration law.

Of course, the Saipan Garment Association may well have its own procedures for avoiding such situations. But in terms of official government requirements, the loop-hole should be closed. Whose responsibility is it? Probably DOLI's - by making its procedures more pro-active.

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It's always a challenge to play with statistics. They can be used to prove almost anything one wants them to. A recent <I>Tribune</I> advertising supplement, issued by the Marianas Visitor Authority, for example, includes a bar graph showing the yearly number of visitor arrivals in the CNMI between 1977 and 2000.

Despite the repeated complaints from the hotel industry - and others in the business sector - that the decline in tourist arrivals is having a devastating effect on their ability to stay in business, according to the graph, there are only five years in the past thirteen (1993-1997) in which tourism arrivals were larger than they were this past year.

Nothing grows forever. Wouldn't it seem only reasonable to think that tourism arrivals, too, would eventually peak and return to a more "normal" level? Everyone is allowed to be an incurable optimist - if that's what he or she wants to be. But successful businessmen are usually more realistic.