

On My Mind

8/10/01

Last week's concern turns out to have been unnecessary - the initiative to empower municipal councils at the expense of legislative delegations did not make it through the legislature in time to be on November's ballot. Nevertheless, the issue of local governance is still there, and is bound to come up again. The time to deal with it is now, while there is no impending deadline for resolution, rather than some time in the future, when political pressure again sets artificial deadlines.

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One of the principles of the legal profession - in the U.S. if not world-wide - is that the appearance of impropriety is to be avoided at all costs. Even if there is no wrong-doing, if a situation or an action looks like it might be questionable, attorneys, judges and justices know that they must back off, withdraw, detach themselves, if they want to retain credibility and integrity.

Unfortunately, this principle does not appear to apply with equal force in other professions. Thus, Rita Inos, CNMI's Commissioner of Education, may legitimately argue that there is nothing wrong with campaigning for the position of lieutenant governor while still on the Public School System (PSS) payroll. After all, the Board has made it legal. In those terms, it's hard to argue against the stance she has taken.

However, even though not an inherent principle in the education profession, there is something to be said for avoiding the appearance of impropriety in that field as well. And this is where neither Inos, nor her boss and fellow Covenant-party candidate for public office, Anthony Pellegrino, have any excuse for continuing to cling to their positions within PSS while running for office. The appearance of impropriety, the risk of conflict of interest, the opportunity to use present office amenities to promote their candidacy, is simply too obvious to ignore. After all, other than the religious community, it is the education profession whose members one expects will reflect, observe and teach the values we all hold so dear.

On a theoretical level, one might argue that all government officials - regardless of whether elected or not - should resign when running for election. They are being paid from public funds to perform the functions of their position. They are not being paid to hold rallies, print flyers, put up billboards, buy advertisements on radio, tv, the newspapers, create and conduct photo opportunities. Anything they do related to campaigning raises the suspicion of conflict of interest, of impropriety. But it seems to have become acceptable practice that - at least for elected officials who run for re-election to the same position - resignation is not necessary. Only those who run for a different position are expected to resign.

Neither Inos nor Pellegrino are elected officials running for re-election. But they do hold a government office. They are supported, figuratively, if not literally, by the public. For the sake of the integrity of the positions they hold, and of the education profession as a whole - if not for the sake of their own - they should resign.

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It is particularly painful that someone whose educational achievements are so singular, whose accomplishments offered such an outstanding model, whose potential for revitalizing CNMI's educational system were so promising, has placed herself in such a vulnerable position as has Inos. Here was a woman who had earned a doctorate in education - the first to do so in the CNMI - and who was willing to return to the CNMI to work for its people rather than take a higher-paid off-island position.

Here was a person with the highest credentials in education the CNMI has ever hired, put in charge of the whole education system, given the position and authority to shape the education - to borrow a phrase - of tomorrow's leaders, a symbol of hope and encouragement for the entire CNMI. Here was someone every girl, every woman in the CNMI could look up to with pride and respect, who could serve as proof of the value of persistence, intelligence, motivation. Instead, she has chosen to join an upstart political party - not even one with high ideals or worthy social goals, but one dominated by dollar signs and self-interest, throwing away whatever claim to pride, self-respect, integrity, she may have had.

To the extent that there is truth to Inos' contention that only by leaving her post and moving to the executive branch will she ever be able to have any effect on the performance of the Department of Education, it is indeed a sad commentary - not only on the priorities of the legislature, but also on the power of politics. Of course, it could also be viewed - at least in part - as a commentary on her own abilities as administrator.....

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Self-respect and integrity took a tumble on another front as well just this past week. On Monday, the editorial in the <I>Tribune</I> announced, quite self-importantly, that the paper's "relaunching" would provide "fairness, integrity, quality, and most importantly, responsibility." After a long string of equally high-blown promises, the editorial ended by stating that "you won't see sensationalism in our newspaper."

Yet the front page of that very same issue of the paper bore the headline, in bold, over-sized type: "Police official selling smut?" The simple fact that the headline was phrased as a question, rather than a statement, was clear proof that there was no factual basis for the accusation. Moreover, the details of the story provided no proof of the accusation either. In fact, the police officer in question is reported, in the story, as saying that yes, he did buy a business that had been selling porn, but that he had closed it the minute he took over. So, where does the headline come from, how can it be justified, as anything other than cheap sensationalism?

Even if, as sometimes happens, the person who wrote the headlines was not the same person who wrote the story, no responsible editor would let such a headline stand without checking to make sure it could be supported. Moreover, the non-sequitur in the story regarding the police officer's denial in involvement in the government's anti-prostitution drive did nothing to enhance the

story, the reporter's credibility, or the editor's judgement.

Lt. Pete W. Onni is quite correct: the <I>Tribune</I> owes him a written apology.

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The <I>Variety</I> also began sporting some cosmetic changes this week - but without the self-congratulatory fanfare that accompanied the <I>Tribune</I>'s changes. Further evidence, in my book, that there's a mole in one or the other organization. Nothing else explains the many similarities - in, among other things, in headline choice and word use.

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Did anyone else see the small news story about a U.S. airline that sent young children traveling alone to the wrong destination twice in one month? The airline's solution to the problem? To accept children traveling alone only on non-stop flights. Reminded me of the response local grocery stores often offer when a product sells out too quickly: to stop ordering it (because it's too much trouble to keep the product in stock). Guess such avoidance of extra effort is not merely a local trait, after all.