

On My Mind
10/19/01

Granted that facing reality can be painful. That 'going into denial' is fairly common. That the effort to overcome that denial is often difficult - so difficult that people spend countless hours and countless dollars each year seeking help from one sort of therapist or another. Granted, furthermore, that 'going into denial' strikes us all at some point or another. Yet none of that begins to explain - nor can it excuse - why the entire membership of the CNMI Legislature appears to be into denial about the same thing at the same time.

Reality is that the CNMI is in a significant economic slump. The evidence is clear. Airlines are reducing services. Hotels are near empty. So are stores, restaurants. Garment factory shipments have declined. Companies are reducing hours, laying off workers. Revenue is far below projection. There may not even be enough money to meet current demands.

Reality is that solutions are needed that will help the CNMI survive, despite the already existing economic slowdown, despite the added blow struck by last month's terrorist attacks. And that it is up to the Legislature, as the voice and the representatives of the people, to help the CNMI survive - to find ways to curb expenses, to stretch limited funds, to limit spending to available monies.

Yet this Legislature appears to be so heavily into denial that it is doing quite the opposite. There is a proposal to establish a new agency: the Youth Affairs Council. Where in the world is funding for staff, facilities, equipment, space to come from? Aren't there already offices dealing with youth affairs? Particularly now, is another agency really needed? How can we afford it?

There is a contract circulating to give hundreds of thousands of dollars to a Washington lobbyist. Where is the money for that to come from? Where is the proof that such an expenditure is warranted, is beneficial to the CNMI? For the \$300,000 involved, aren't there far more important things needed by the CNMI?

Tinian and Rota members are holding Senate appointments hostage - they want as "ransom" dialysis clinics on their islands. Where is that money supposed to come from? How will the extra costs of staff, facilities, equipment, space for each island be paid for? And for how many people will all that money have been expended?

A bill has been introduced to provide infrastructure for the Northern Islands. Another to establish a Department of Corrections separate from the Department of Public Safety. Another to reorganize the Bureau of Public Lands with, among other things, higher pay for attendance at board meetings. Each of these will again require finding additional funding for staff, space, equipment, facilities - money that isn't there, money that is needed for any number of higher priorities.

It may be election time. But that's no excuse. If the money is not there - and it clearly is not - the Legislature has no business introducing such frivolous measures. It is a disservice to the

people, an abdication of accountability and responsibility, an act of sickness if not insanity.

Voters might want to take a close look at just who it is, among the present members of the Legislature, that is pushing for such irresponsible measures. Voters might also want to take a closer look at who is running for office. How many of those candidates are also into denial, promising one expensive program and benefit after another without any means to pay for them?

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The <I>Pacific Daily News</I> ran a series last month on the savings the Guam government could realize if it cut some of its give-away programs. Among those analyzed was the COLA for retirees, and permissible double-dipping. It showed, in graphic terms, how many books, how many teachers for the schools, how many street lights, those savings could provide. As one can imagine, the savings were substantial.

In the case of the double-dipping employees in executive branch agencies, who retired but then returned to work, the cost, for Guam, was in the vicinity of \$1.5 million a year - and that was excluding teachers and health care professionals! According to the <I>PDN</I> story, that would have paid for 25,000 text books at \$60 each, 35 teachers with an average salary of \$43,370 (including benefits) or 10,000 street lights for six months at \$25/month.

It's a pity that none of the CNMI reporters - or their publishers and editors - seem interested in or capable of doing a similar story.

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A campaign that may incur its own backlash is the vicious attack being directed against Judge Sablan-Onerheim. Sablan-Onerheim refused to find a live-in baby-sitter/housekeeper guilty of child abuse, and despite the fact that the child suffered no injury, its parents have mounted an extraordinary attack against the judge, whose term is about to expire. Sablan-Onerheim is only the second judge whose renewed appointment to the bench is required, by law, to be submitted to the voters for approval.

There is a perception that Onerheim may not be the wisest, most effective, talented, learned of judges, and indeed, I myself had been inclined not to vote for her renewal. I did not, I might add, feel that way about Judge Bellas, whose re-appointment was rejected by the voters, and whose term, sad to relate, has now expired.

Yet, despite the injustice of providing support to a lesser candidate, I am now inclined to support Judge Sablan-Onerheim's reappointment, simply because her persecution has done such violence to the system.

It might behoove lawmakers - and the courts - to re-examine whether the law providing for a vote on judicial reappointments shouldn't be repealed. Based on these two examples it would appear that the people of the CNMI simply aren't yet ready to judge a judge on his/her competence.

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Is it true that CUC's hands are tied in coming to terms with the Tinian Dynasty's request that it not be held to the CRM agreement to hook up to CUC power once it became available? It seems short-sighted to punish the Dynasty at a time when there's so much more to be gained from its continuing existence than from its demise.

What the coconut wireless says, though, is that CUC has been trapped by an agreement it in turn signed with Telesource in the construction of the Tinian power plant. The rumor says that CUC committed itself to paying Telesource, in exchange for its construction of the power plant, a fixed monthly amount, regardless of how much power the Tinian plant sold to consumers. And that without the Dynasty's contribution, CUC cannot meet that payment.

As a result, looks like CNMI/CRM/CUC is about to kill a potential "golden goose." What a pity.

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How much weight should one give to precedent? There's a worrisome precedent looming on the political scene - election of a haole to the legislature. Previous haoles have run: Michael White, Larry Hillblom, Ken Govendo. None made it. Now there's another haole running. The question is whether voters will deem this candidate sufficiently worthy to set a precedent.