

On My Mind  
12/14/01

Incoming House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Stanley T. Torres has proposed that before bills are even introduced on the floor of the House, they be put before the public for input and comment. The intent, according to a story in the <I>Variety</I>, is to promote transparency and public involvement in the work of the House. A commendable goal - and a fine idea in principle - but in actuality, that particular strategy wouldn't work all that well for a very simple reason - there are too many bills introduced in the House.

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During the 12<sup>th</sup> Legislature, there were 426 bills introduced in the House. Of those, only 59 were signed into law - a mere 14%. Expecting anyone to look at, review, comment on that many bills when their chances of ever becoming law is so small is unrealistic. Even if there were a lot of enthusiasm and interest in the beginning, it would soon fade as people realized how useless an exercise it was.

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The solution, though, is not to drop the idea, but to do something about the number of bills introduced. In other legislatures, there are rules limiting the number of bills that may be introduced. This can be done in a number of ways: by setting limits for each legislator, or setting limits for the session, or weeding out duplicate bills.... It could be carried further: weeding out bills that are poorly written, that are redundant, that are too self-serving, that just wouldn't make good law.

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Such a limitation on the introduction of bills is long overdue in the CNMI legislature. Enormous amounts of time - and paper - are wasted each year by the processing of bills introduced only for the purpose of making the legislator look good. As it stands now, regardless of whether a bill has merit or ever becomes law, the author gets credit for its introduction, and with the help of the media, the number of bills introduced by a legislator during his tenure is now considered a measure of the legislator's effectiveness.

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What's needed is a change in attitude well as tighter control over the number of bills introduced - a better ratio of bills introduced to bills that become law. To begin with, members should be judged by the number of their bills that become law, not by the number they merely introduce. Secondly, bills should not be allowed to reach the floor until they've undergone some sort of review not only for proper form but also for reasonableness and viability, for redundancy, and duplication of others already introduced - in either house.

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With a more reasonable number of bills, Torres' idea of making all of them available to the public for review and comment would stand a far better chance of realization.

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The Senate, it should be noted, doesn't do much better. Of 129 bills introduced, only 17 have become law. It too, could afford to place a limit on introduction of bills.....

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Another reform being proposed for the House is a reduction in number of members. Again, a

good idea in principle, but not, in my opinion, in the form under discussion. The House leadership, according to a *Variety* story in today's paper, plans to again introduce a legislative initiative reducing the House to 14 members - but also to provide island-wide election for them. There is no question that the CNMI could easily function just as well - if not better - with fewer House members. But doing away with district representation to elect them island-wide defeats the whole purpose of a bicameral legislature.

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Members of the Senate are already elected on an island-wide basis. If the House members are elected on the same basis, the CNMI will have, in effect, a two-senate legislature - at least as far as representation on Saipan goes. Presumably, the two houses would still have a few distinct functions and responsibilities, but the balance between population density and geographical identity provided by the present two-house system would no longer exist.

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Nor would island wide election of members of both houses solve the uneasiness with the form - or effectiveness - of local governance that persists despite repeated tinkering with the provision for local governance in the CNMI Constitution. Rather than applying a band-aid approach to the problem, it might be more fruitful to re-examine the question of local governance in its entirety. One question that might be worth asking: why is it necessary that all three islands have identical forms of local governance? In terms of population and number of households alone, it is naive to think that the same structure could be equally satisfactory on all three islands.

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Perhaps the best answer is to leave the local governance structure up to each island to determine for itself - within limits, of course. Limits are essential to keep the local governance structure from becoming yet another means of providing jobs to relatives and supporters. It is tempting to propose that local governance be limited to what each island can afford. If local revenue from the Tinian Dynasty increases, Tinian could then build a more elaborate structure of local government. But if Saipan residents refused to approve its mayor's fund-raising efforts, Saipan's local government would have to remain lean.

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"Lean" government is, of course, desirable in any case.

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In times of a "lean" economy, perhaps borrowing something from our neighbor to the south would not be looked upon as disdainfully as it otherwise might - Guam's Visitor's Bureau, in conjunction with the *Pacific Daily News* has come up with ten ways "to bring our visitors back again." The list is one the CNMI could easily adopt as well and - with the recent focus on regional tourism - would perhaps be forgiven for making use of someone else's good idea.

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The ten ways? With some minor editing: Help beautify the island by keeping your house painted. Keep your yard neat, the lawn mowed. Pick up trash. Make someone's day by holding open the door. Offer to give directions to tourists who seem lost. Offer to take their picture at scenic spots. Stop for pedestrians. Make friends with tourists. Smile at and greet visitors. Show them the WAVE (Welcome All Visitors Enthusiastically).

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Attracting tourists is everyone's job, not just that of the MVA. Making attractive the product that the MVA spends so much effort selling is also everyone's job.

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The creative partnership formed between the Saipan and Northern Island Delegation, the Department of Public Works, the Nursery Association and the Marianas Visitor's Authority to clean up and make more attractive parts of Middle Road deserves special recognition - both for crafting the partnership, and for embarking on such a long-overdue project. Middle Road - the major linkage for all of Saipan - has, with one exception, not received any attention in the past, with all the money, effort, and attention going to Beach Road. It's nice to see that someone, finally, is going to do something about Saipan's other main road - which has been pretty drab and dismal until now.

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Creativity abounds at the Arts Council Christmas show, which opened today. The exhibit is disappointingly limited, with far fewer entries than make for fruitful Christmas shopping, but what is there is worth seeing. Particularly striking are a couple of black and white acrylics done by John Davis; Jean Rayphand's acrylics, while not as dramatic, are very appealing in their own right. In addition to other artwork, woven baskets, Carolinian bead jewelry, and some mwars are also on display and for sale.

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The show is open from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, and from 9:00 a.m. til 1:00 p.m. on Saturday through January 4, 2002.

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Seems that incoming legislators have been given orientation as to the intricacies of parliamentary procedure. But that's only half the equation. Will they also get background information on the substantive issues due to come before them?