

On My Mind

1/18/02

A new beginning. (Can there be an old one?) New faces, new styles of operation, new goals, hopes and aspirations - all ushered in with the inaugural ceremonies this past Monday on Capitol Hill and at the Memorial Park amphitheater.

The new governor's speech was splendid - earnest, ardent, hopeful. It made wonderful promises: integrity, transparency, accountability. It hit all the right notes, from the paean to the Lieutenant Governor at the beginning, to the "theft" of words from the President of Palau in the middle, to the nice play on words about creating a new wealth in common at the end. It was well delivered - audible, moving, smoothly parsed. And it was obviously well-liked - as shown by the repeated interruptions of applause.

It had lots of quote-worthy phrases - for example: "[we] are ready to work;" "we respect our past;" "[despite adverse economic conditions] there is much we can do...to take control;" "we cannot be tied to the old school;" "we want our police to be a force for peace;" "[we] will make performance matter;" "we will work within our communities...and...with other island communities...until our Pacific shines as an example to the world;" "our economic future depends on educating our children;" "each of us...must...put our wealth of knowledge in service to our community;" "a government that believes in the free hand of commerce, but understands all hands must sometimes join together;" "as a community there are few limits to what we can do;" "this is not a time to put out your hand; this is the time to give a hand;" "sharing makes us whole."

The Governor set himself an arduous path in making so many admirable promises. It was exciting, uplifting, encouraging. Yet it bears repeating that one can only work with what is at hand, that it often takes time to see results, that no one is infallible. It also bears repeating that the vision promised by the Governor can not be accomplished single-handedly. It will require faith, dedication and support from every one else - in government and out. (Which, in turn, may well call for a continuous stream of encouragement, reminders, appeals and exhortations from the office of the governor to the rest of us....) The question, of course, is on how much he will be able to follow through. It is difficult - having seen how government is apt to operate - not to be skeptical, cynical.

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And by week's end, as was inevitable, fallibility was already in evidence. As was reported by the <I>Tribune</I> itself, the Governor barred the <I>Trib's</I> reporter from a press conference he had called. This was apparently prompted not only by long-standing displeasure with the <I>Trib's</I> shabby treatment of the Governor during the campaign, but also by unhappiness with the <I>Trib's</I> replacement publisher, brother to the former governor's wife, who, in turn, was known to have supported the Covenant rather than the Republican gubernatorial candidate.

One can understand - and sympathize with - the Governor's attitude, and with the difficulty of

dealing with such distasteful circumstances. It is, however, the sign of a true statesman to be able to rise above such situations, to not “sweat the small stuff” and focus on the larger issues. In this case, the larger issue involves both censorship and freedom of the press. Family and political feuds are one thing. Denying information access is an entirely different matter.

We all know that the <I>Tribune</I> is Willie Tan’s paper. We all understand what that implies. Nonetheless, it does offer a second “platform.” It does provide information and viewpoints that the other paper does not. So long as it breaks no law, it is entitled to publish, and its reporters should be provided the same access as are those from other media.

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The inauguration of the Washington Representative in the same ceremony set a precedent, as was noted by the in-coming Representative, Pete A. Tenorio, himself. Also new was the dominance of the American red, white and blue on stage and the many American flags in the surrounding area. There was not an equivalent number of CNMI flags. The implication is worrisome. Is it the Governor’s intention to increase the “Americanization” of the CNMI?

Was the appearance of the representative of American Samoa and of the representative from Yap in suit and tie - rather than in native attire as has been their custom in the past - another indication of the Governor’s intention to “Americanize” the CNMI?

The line between island ambience and modernity is elusive and ill-defined. Which side to favor - when choice can or must be made - depends in part on how tourism’s target is viewed. Are the targets gamblers and businessmen - to whom modernity is more important - or are they families and vacationers seeking a tropical setting, to whom the island ambience is more important?

And yet the Governor made a point of the importance of a healthy environment. “We will do more than simply protect our islands and waters from further pollution and injury; we will work to bring back their beauty and health,” he said. And he repeated the words of Palau President Remengesau - an ardent environmentalist - “Protect the best. Improve the rest.”

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I hope Senator Pete Reyes is satisfied - his much-touted speech has now been put before the public - thanks to the <I>Marianas Variety</I> - enabling even those who did not attend the Senate inaugural ceremonies to share his immortal words. And while his effusive thanks to family, staff, and assorted others is all very nice, there didn’t seem all that much in the rest of the speech to warrant the fuss he made at not being able to deliver it in front of a live audience.

The Senator keeps talking about working together - but he’s not doing much to bring it about. Working together, as he apparently sees it, means doing so on his terms: rejecting the present Rota-Tinian coalition in the Senate, and again allowing Saipan members to dominate the Senate.

But the fact of the matter is Rota and Tinian members have decided they’re tired of that scenario.

and they have taken steps to change it. Instead of acting like a poor loser, loudly complaining at his displacement from a position of control, Reyes should practice what he preaches, and accept his role in the minority. Just to see what it feels like, if for no other reason.

To those who argue that much on Tinian and Rota is “subsidized” by Saipan, it should be pointed out that there is no other way to provide residents of those islands with an equitable infrastructure. It is a given with multi-island entities - until power or water can be transported from one island to another, there is no alternative but to build power plants, water systems, on each inhabited island even if that island itself can not meet the costs. On the other hand, the islands must have sufficient critical mass to make it all worth while. Rota and Tinian have both developed tourist attractions that also benefit Saipan, for example. The population of the Northern Islands has not yet reached that point.

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The <I>Variety</I> has now published the remarks of Senator Ramon S. Guerrero as well. Does it intend to publish the comments of the remaining seven as well? If it doesn't, how will we know whether it's because the others didn't prepare remarks, or because the <I>Variety</I> chose not to print them?

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Isn't the complete about-face, with the departure of its former publisher, John DelRosario, in the <I>Tribune's</I> attitude toward the new administration interesting? Can Willie Tan really be so unprincipled? Can the publisher really be so obsequious? (The answer, obviously, is yes.) The real question is whether the new administration will be able to keep its hands clean. Even the former governor succumbed. Will this one be any different? One can only hope.