

On My Mind

7/12/02

One has to wonder what Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Insular Affairs David B. Cohen - who was on island earlier this week - had in mind when he raised, with each of his several audiences, the need for the CNMI to become self-sufficient. To give the man credit, he did acknowledge that it might be difficult, given the islands' lack of natural resources, remoteness and vulnerability to typhoons. But at a time in history when transnational corporations and global economies predominate, the concept of self-sufficiency seems a little behind the times.

Cohen also said that the CNMI - as well as the other island entities within his purview - should diversify its economy. Granted that Cohen is new to the position and that his visit was intended more as an information-gathering than a solution-providing trip, it is nonetheless disappointing that he could do no better than offer the same old bromides.

The need to diversify the CNMI's economy has long been recognized by all concerned. But how to do so - in a manner that is relevant to the islands, that is ecologically responsible, that is economically feasible - has not yet emerged. One could have wished that Cohen, having recognized the need to diversify the economy, would have taken it one step further, and offered to help find ways for the islands to do so.

Cohen's other message, according to all reports, was the need to be more accountable in the spending of federal monies. No quarrel there. Accountability in the spending of funds is needed throughout government - be they federal or local funds.

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By the time this is posted, Typhoon Halong will have passed with even less damage to the CNMI than was done by Typhoon Chata'an. Physical damage is one thing, but the psychological, the emotional, stress of waiting, not knowing for sure whether and when it's going to hit, is something else.

It is much worse when information about the pending storm is hard to come by, and then isn't even consistent. The Emergency Management Office - if and when it's possible to get through the busy signal - says one thing. The radio - if the power is still on - says another. The TV - if it's still operating - says another. The two newspapers don't agree either. And when, as occurred this past week, the internet is down, making the national weather service unreachable, the not knowing becomes almost unbearable.

Personal issues notwithstanding, it's a sorry state of affairs when accurate information about something as important to survival as the expected strength and time of arrival of a coming storm is not available to local residents. At one time, radio station KSAI offered 24-hour weather forecasts on a dedicated phone line. But KSAI is no longer in existence, and nothing has taken its place - leaving all of us flapping in the wind, so to speak - unsure of what to do, or when.

With the prediction that weather this year will be more turbulent than usual, shouldn't EMO and the Administration find a better way of obtaining and dispersing accurate and timely information?

sooner, rather than later?

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Newspapers are, in some places, looked upon as models of good writing, of proper usage of the English language. While both local papers do provide - through guest editorials, and sometimes through their own editorial commentary - such models, most of the news stories per se don't do as well.

Gathered over the years, herewith a few examples. Many have to do with the idiomatic use of prepositions - those little words that introduce phrases of various lengths and purposes: "pleaded guilty of an indictment" (one pleads guilty <I>to</I> an indictment). "kids are currently on their 6th grade" (a child is <I>in</I> a grade, not on one). "acquisition will result to a monopoly" (usage calls for something to result <I>in</I> not to). "government should keep an eye against big companies" (keep an eye <I>on</I>, not against). "police swooped down an establishment" (one swoops down <i>on</i> an establishment).

Others have to do with word usage: "set aside a proposed legislation" (while legislation can mean a law, or even a proposed law, in this instance, usage calls for using the words <i>law</i> or <I>bill</I> instead of legislation). "gave an ocular inspection" (ocular is too technical. The correct adjective is <I>visual</I>). "doctors in the top wrung of government pay scales" (wrung is the past participle of wring. The correct word is <I>rung</I> as in ladder).

More: "The arrestees were found smuggling on the second floor" (it's difficult to see how one could observe "smuggling" - which means moving (exporting or importing) something illegally - in a room on the second floor of a building. The arrestees could have been found handling smuggled goods.....) "[he] was bequeathed with warm accolades" (bequeath means to leave to, pass down to, as in a will. Here words like <I>given</I> or <I>awarded</I> (without the "with") are called for). [he] begrudged legislators over their alleged tendency..." (use of the word "over" in this phrase is incorrect). "as of yesterday both neither sent word nor showed up" ("neither" as a pronoun usually implies two, so that "both" is unnecessary. However, as a pronoun, it does not call for the correlative conjunction "nor." The sentence should read "as of yesterday, neither sent word or showed up").

There are also occasional coined words, like "semestral," not found in any dictionary.

There is no question that English is a tricky language. Nor should it be forgotten that English is not the first language for most of the local papers' reporters. But the net result is that the local newspapers provide at least as many examples of mis-use of the language as they do examples of good language usage. Thus - more's the pity - they are not very useful as a teaching tool, except in testing students' abilities to identify errors.

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Which raises the question as to how viable the Governor's latest education idea is. He has proposed, according to a story in Thursday's <I>Variety</I>, that the CNMI make teaching English language courses to students from Asian and Pacific nations a third industry. It sounds like a good idea until one stops to consider who will teach the courses.

It will probably be necessary to bring in people - presumably from the mainland - to do the teaching, since English language skills - particularly so far as writing is concerned - are not a strong point with most locals. That may help the economy, but it would appear that it will provide only secondary employment, rather than professional employment, to the people of the CNMI.

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Some are asking whether the shooting in the LA airport was or was not at "an act of terrorism." Presumably, the answer affects how the event will be treated, and what kind, if any, of retaliatory steps will be taken. Given the circumstances, it seems pretty clear that it does not fall under the category of domestic crime, that international issues are involved.

Regardless of how it is considered, one of the first steps that should be taken is to ensure that Israeli and Arabian counters - or baggage claim areas - at airports are no longer located in close proximity to each other.

One hopes that this awful, frightening event - which seems to have faded from sight suspiciously quickly - will at least serve to emphasize that curbing terrorism is not a domestic issue, nor even solely an American issue, but one that more logically and legitimately belongs within the arena of the United Nations.

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It's puzzling that Guam would have been so devastated by a typhoon that did not reach super-typhoon strength - especially after having experienced, not so long ago, a true supertyphoon. Weren't any corrective actions taken to protect against the next one?

According to some, one protective action that was taken may have backfired. The story goes that felled wooden power poles were replaced by concrete ones, and that it is the concrete ones - in the very same area - that, being less flexible than the wooden ones, cracked.

Though the question has not yet been raised officially, it does seem worth pursuing.

