

## On My Mind

7/26/02

One has to give the man credit, despite all the empty promises and wayward carryings-on. For the first time in the history of the CNMI, its incumbent governor will be calling upon the president of the Republic of the Philippines. It's not clear why this has never happened before, but the fact that it is finally happening is certainly worthy of note, and Governor Babauta deserves credit for setting that precedent.

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The Republic of the Philippines is, after all, not only geographically a neighbor, relatively speaking, but closely related in numerous other ways as well. Moreover, a large part of the work force is Filipino, and the Filipinos are also the largest ethnic group in the CNMI. In addition, there are many commonalities in language, in foods, in religion, history, and in customs. Yet - other than making use of Filipino workers - the connection would seem to have been largely ignored in the past.

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Babauta's visit to the President of the Republic of the Philippines in his official capacity as Governor of the CNMI indicates that the connection might now undergo significant change. And that is a positive sign. The Philippines have a lot to offer the CNMI in the way of resources and services that could benefit the CNMI. In return the CNMI can offer the Philippines a market - to the economic benefit of both parties.

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Babauta will also be reassuring President Macapagal-Arroya that labor conditions for the Filipinos in the CNMI have improved considerably over the years, and continue to be monitored and evaluated. It is, in fact, quite fitting that Babauta should be the first governor to make an official visit to the Republic of the Philippines - it was Babauta, after all, who first publically acknowledged that abuse of foreign workers was indeed occurring in the CNMI. His visit could be seen as reflecting an on-going concern for their plight.

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In other countries, when a prime minister fails to reflect the position of his or her party, the prime minister resigns, and an election is held for a new one. In our system, however, it doesn't work the same way. Though Speaker of the House Heinz Hofschneider has stated his intention to resign should the House not support his position on the need to pass a user tax, it is neither necessary nor customary for him to do so. It is, moreover, to be fervently hoped that he does not, in fact, resign, regardless of the outcome of the ultimate vote on imposition of the user tax.

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Hofschneider has shown admirable integrity, commitment and leadership skills in his tenure as Speaker. Those skills will continue to be needed as the House faces the many other issues it must deal with during its term. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that House members and the Speaker will agree on every one of those issues, but to change the Speakership every time there is disagreement would be more than a little disruptive. Just as a captain does not abandon ship when he encounters bad weather, so should the Speaker not "abandon ship" but stay to see the ship through both this storm and any others that may appear during his term.

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The alternative - to yield control of the House to those who oppose the user tax - also defined as those who support garment factory interests - would be a major calamity. It would, among other things, totally negate the last election, in which supporters of the garment industry were, with only one exception, voted out of office, defeated by the electorate. The people clearly stated in that election that they did not want garment factory interests making their laws. There is no reason to believe that the electorate has changed its minds in the eight months since then.

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Now the garment industry is asking for a delay in the public hearing on the user-fee increase - offered as a "compromise" in this ever-messier situation - which was scheduled for next week. Since there is no doubt about the outcome of the hearing - it will be packed by garment factory supporters - there seems little point to conducting it, much less delaying it. The garment industry does not need more time to orchestrate its appearance. The hearing should be held as scheduled. The pity is that there is no counter-force willing and able to match Willie's stage show.

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While one may admire the Governor for his precedent-setting visit to the Republic of the Philippines (as well as for his public call to night club workers to report abuse), there's not much to admire in his public confession that he can't manage his time very well (as reported in yesterday's <I>Variety</I>). One could have hoped for an indication that, at the very least, he did attempt to prioritize the demands on his time, or that he did realize he should give preference to those to whom he had made a formal commitment. But there's not the tiniest evidence that either of those thoughts even crossed his mind.

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It may be part of the culture to pay more attention to the person with whom one is talking than to someone who may be waiting elsewhere, but public dignitaries have much larger issues and audiences to consider, and it just isn't very politic to let someone who just drops in cause the cancellation of an agreed-to meeting (unless, of course, it is a real emergency). Wasn't escaping such dilemmas the primary purpose of that back stairway into and out of the Governor's office?

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To what extent the lack of a "press secretary" is a contributing factor is not clear. But obviously, someone up there on Capitol Hill ought to be taxed with seeing that the Governor's calendar is kept under control, and that the Governor does a better job of keeping his commitments.

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Public Law 13-17, which gives the Marianas Public Land Authority means for compensating land owners for property that has been "taken" by the CNMI contains a provision that would appear to indicate that the powers-that-be in the CNMI do not yet understand the value of public land in the CNMI. They do not seem to understand that there is an absolute limit to the amount of public land available in these islands, and not only is there no more where that came from, but

there's very little left of it.

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The provision states that should the land owner prefer a land exchange instead of a dollar amount, and provided it is approved by the Board of the Marianas Public Land Authority, a land exchange should be undertaken - <B>"provided that the area of public land shall not exceed twice the area of the private land to be exchanged."</B> (emphasis added)

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Scarce commodities are usually priced higher, not lower, than commodities that are readily available. So, logically speaking, the formula should be reversed - the public land exchanged for private land should be <B>half</B> the size of the private land, not double the size. It makes no sense to be so profligate with an asset that is in such short supply.

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And if this is the approach used in exchanging land, there can be little doubt that it will also be used in setting the price for the private land that the MPLA is now authorized to pay for. Even though the majority of available public land in the CNMI has already been given away at bargain- basement rates, is it too late to urge that the MPLA Board be given a few lessons in basic economics before the latest give-away takes place?

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The <I>Tribune's</I> series of full-page ads this week - a black background with only the day of the week printed in the middle - was intriguing, to say the least. Black Monday, followed by black Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday raised all sorts of questions: Would it stay black until the stocks went back up? Until the user-fee tax was defeated? Until Rota got its FEMA monies approved? Trying to decode the message - and guess who was footing the bill - was almost more fun than the <I>Tribune's</I> daily "whatzit?" puzzle.

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Today, the all-black page contains the words: "Friday. What's one week without Saturday and Sunday?" The next page, again all black, contains the words "The answer..." a picture of the top half of the Trib, and the words "on Monday." The suspense would seem to be over. But I'm having trouble de-coding the message - it doesn't make any sense to me.