

On My Mind
8/16/02

The governor is scheduled to address members of the House and Senate this afternoon in a bid to clarify and explain to the legislature, and anyone else who is interested, just what the status is of the government's finances. Presumably, he will make clear just where, what and how large the deficit is, and what he plans to do about it to keep the government operating, if not solvent.

The fact that he has asked to meet with the legislature and that the legislature has agreed to do so is, to my knowledge, unprecedented, an event to be expected only in times of great emergency. Should one draw the conclusion, then, that the CNMI must be in a state of great emergency? Or has the governor asked for and been granted the meeting prompted by more benign motives - as an attempt to promote greater cooperation between legislative and executive branch, among all government agencies?

Hopeful as that sign may be, it will, nevertheless, be necessary to view whatever the governor chooses to say with a great deal of skepticism and reserve. He has shown that he has good speech writers (as attested to by his inaugural address). But he has also shown that what he says often takes on rather different forms in actuality. Moreover, despite the plenitude of legal advice available to him, some of his pronouncements from that quarter have not stood up to public scrutiny all that well.

For example, the governor has claimed that the beyond-the-pale salaries given certain of his entourage are legal - after all, he sent the sanction requests over to the Legislature. But just as a nominated judge does not take office until his appointment has been approved by the appropriate legislative committee, so do those salaries not take effect until approved by the appropriate committees. Since they have yet to be approved, the governor's actions, by his own admission, are NOT legal.

The same holds true in regard to the expenditure of funds in excess of the approved deficit. The legislature has not yet granted approval for doing so, and until it does, no waiver of the prohibition for exceeding the present deficit limit exists - despite the fact that the governor did submit a request for waiver.

The <I>Tribune</I>'s decision to publish even on week-ends couldn't be better timed. It should be able to give us all - especially those without cable tv - a full account long before Monday's papers arrive.

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"Roilin' Froilan" (roiling means turbulent, agitating) claims that just because previous legislatures never demanded that the sitting governor limit expenditure to expected revenue projections, there's no reason why the present governor should have to do so. In a letter to the <I>Variety</I> this past Wednesday, Froilan claims that the CNMI government has consistently incurred a deficit, yet no previous legislature ever demanded that the administration first seek its

sanction before doing so.

But past behavior should not be the standard by which to judge present behavior. The standard should be one of legality, if not also prudence. This legislature - or at least the Speaker of the House of Representatives and his supporters - is determined to press for greater accountability in government by demanding that the budget be realistic, that it be balanced, and that it be adhered to. Disallowing an even greater deficit is certainly a valid step in that direction.

The validity of claims to legal authority and constitutionality notwithstanding - after all, Froilan is an engineer, not a lawyer - the disdain expressed by the editor in his response to Froilan's letter was uncalled for. The tenor was unprofessional, and does not reflect well on either the editor or the newspaper itself - both of which make claim to be objective.

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For someone who has declared that he is too old to run again for Governor, Froilan is certainly working very hard to keep his name in front of the public, and to remain active in public policy debates. He's even proposed that he be named Bank of Saipan receiver!

If not governor, what position is he running for? The rhetoric is far too critical to qualify as that of a candidate for elder statesman.....

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Until recently, the "P" word that was anathema in the CNMI was "planning." As in long-range planning. There just wasn't any. And problems that came about as a result were then, and continue to be, dealt with on an ad hoc basis.

But it would appear that another "P" word is gaining greater notoriety. The word is "prioritization." With a few exceptions, there doesn't seem to be any. Bills introduced in the legislature receive no priority ranking. CIP expenditures do not appear to reflect any prioritization. Assessment of travel requests, vendor bills, budget allotments, expenditure of agency efforts - none seem to reflect any effort at prioritization.

A perfect example is the recent statement by the Department of Public Safety Commissioner that marijuana users should be more vigorously prosecuted. As though use of marijuana was a major problem, and a major crime. But isn't the use of ice more dangerous, more prevalent, more closely related to other criminal acts? Isn't the rash of burglaries and thefts - especially those that victimize tourists - more damaging to the CNMI economy? Shouldn't the reckless driving that maims and kills human beings be a higher priority?

With the limited funds available in the CNMI at the moment, it behooves all agencies, all personnel, all offices, operations, yes, all three branches of government, to do a far more strenuous job of prioritizing where and on what their resources should be spent.

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About a month ago it was reported that a religious group wanted to build a \$100 million walled holy city on Niue. The project would be an exclusive, guarded retreat, complete with temples and accommodation for 600 people. Despite the lack of detail, it did sound strikingly similar to the proposal that was made for Rota a while back. One more such report has surfaced recently - also for a Pacific island, if memory serves.

Are the proposals related? Are they genuine? Why are they appearing now? Is anyone checking it out? Food for thought!

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Food. After a frustrating lack of success, I finally asked, at a store that shall be nameless, whether it carried applesauce. Without hesitation, I was pointed toward the gravy and spaghetti sauce aisle. The applesauce was there rather than with canned fruit because of the "sauce" image the foodstuffs had in common, a helpful clerk said.

Surely that can't be why my recent searches for buttermilk, frozen leaf spinach, small cans of plain unstewed tomatoes rather than sauce, fresh orange juice with pulp, Swiss cheese in chunks not slices, muenster cheese, tuna fillets rather than sashimi slices, honey wheat bagels, plain yoghurt in the larger size, have not been successful? That I'm searching in the wrong aisle?