

On My Mind

1/10/03

We all know stories of "solutions" applied to problems that not only didn't solve the problems, but created new ones, like the mongooses imported to Hawaii to control agricultural pests destroying the sugar cane, only to discover that the mongooses were diurnal (were awake during the day and slept at night), while the pests were nocturnal (were out foraging at night but slept during the day). And since there were no natural enemies for mongooses, this left Hawaii plagued with both agricultural pests and mongooses.

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The bouncing around being done up on Capitol Hill to find solutions to CNMI's economic woes seems equally short-sighted and uninformed. Tax the garment industry. Increase sin taxes. Cut working hours. Privatize medical care. Get the feds to drop all matching requirements. Cut salaries. Go into debt. Cut holidays. Restructure Tinian's gaming industry. Privatize health insurance, etc., etc.

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There is no sign that any of these suggestions has been looked at closely enough to know whether it would actually solve the problem, or whether it would only make matters worse, much less, to determine which, if any, would offer the CNMI "more bang for the buck."

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Some of the suggestions are pretty draconian. It seems foolish to act on them with so little knowledge of the consequences and long-range implications.

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Indeed, some of the suggestions appear to simply move the problem from the public sector to the private sector. Privatizing medical care, for example, would free up millions of dollars in the government's budget for other obligations, but if the expenses involved were forced upon the private sector and upon individual subscribers, how much more money would actually be freed up to flow into the economy? And where would support for those unable to meet medical expenses come from?

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Despite all the show of struggling to find ways to improve the economy, there's not much evidence that any real effort is actually being made to do so. A private business in financial trouble - if anyone in management had any intelligence - would quickly try to find ways to cut out all the frills and unnecessary expenses, to streamline operations, to try and build what used to be considered ideal - a "mean and lean" machine.

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But even the Commonwealth Ports Authority, which is doing everything in its power to increase its revenue - even at the expense of the rest of the CNMI - has taken no visible steps to cut out frills and unnecessary expenses, to streamline operations, to become an effective "lean and mean" organization.

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Perhaps what all those people on Capitol Hill should consider is turning the work of government itself over to the private sector?

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Speaking of the CPA and its efforts to increase its revenue at the expense of the rest of us, the Marianas Public Land Authority's "counter-offer" to agree to turn over all that public land along Middle Road to the CPA - as CPA has requested - in exchange for a percentage of the revenue that the CPA might derive from lease of the land makes no sense whatsoever. That is public land, and it is the public that should benefit from any revenue generated from that land, not CPA.

CPA claims it needs that space for port purposes, but renting it out to generate revenue for its operations is not the same thing.

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MPLA should stick to its guns: lease whatever land CPA claims it needs for operations to CPA, but retain title to the land, and retain the leases from existing revenue-generating businesses.

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We like the emphasis on inauguration Don Farrell gave to Commonwealth Day (yesterday's rather silently observed holiday) in yesterday's <I>Tribune</I> better than the more arcane emphasis on a presidential proclamation the governor gave in his message to both papers. Farrell recalls that Commonwealth Day was the anniversary of the inauguration and swearing in of the CNMI's first governor, first Senate president and first House speaker, and first legislature - the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in fact, of the CNMI's self-government.

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The governor's message, on the other hand, claims that Commonwealth Day recognizes President Jimmy Carter's proclamation that the CNMI would now have, under the Covenant, local self-government under its own Constitution. Carter's proclamation, however, was actually issued on October 24, 1977.

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Nonetheless, one wonders why the occasion was not given more notice. The CNMI may be under economic duress at the moment, but, all things considered, it has done very well for itself in the short 25 years of its existence - having maintained a stable government, developed a viable infrastructure, and appreciably raised the standard of living for all its inhabitants.

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It should be remembered, too, that in most societies, being twenty-five is not considered all that mature an age. The CNMI still has the benefits of maturity - and wisdom - to look forward to.

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It would not be inappropriate, on its twenty-fifth anniversary, for the CNMI to propose that the electoral college system of electing the president be done away with, so that, finally, people residing in the CNMI - and the other island entities - could also vote for U.S. president.. The electoral college - established by the U.S. Constitution - provides that the states elect representatives to the electoral college, who then cast their vote for president. The number of representatives from each state equals the total of senators and representatives each state has in the U.S. Congress. Because the island entities (Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin

Islands and the CNMI) are not considered “states” and thus have no representative to the electoral college, they cannot participate in election of the president.

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Last year's controversy over election ballots in Florida - where Al Gore received the highest number of popular votes but not the highest number of electoral college votes - has once again raised concerns about the cumbersomeness of the electoral college process. The CNMI should seek out groups lobbying for abolition of the electoral college, and join forces with them for the right for the CNMI - and other island entities - to vote for president as well.

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Last but not least: it's nice to see a few pictures of the governor at a desk, doing governor-type work like signing bills, instead of putting on other people's outfits. Taekwondo indeed! At least the <I>Variety</I> had enough of a sense of decorum to put it on the back page! It was beginning to take the shape of a “what's next” game - the gay beauty-queen contest???????