

On My Mind

6/6/03

With only four months left to go before election time, you'd think the members of the legislature, especially those intending to run for re-election, would be doing their best to impress the voters with their effectiveness - their ability to get things done and to get laws passed (through **BOTH** houses) that promote the well-being of all the people of the CNMI.

Instead, members of the legislature are behaving like spoilt children, wasting time - and money - bickering over trivial, inconsequential matters, with the result that neither is their image enhanced, nor are the voters being served.

First it was Senate Floor Leader Adriano's reported rejection of every one of the dozens of bills passed by the House in a marathon session because all of them were House-initiated bills. Then it was the Tinian delegation and what's left of the Rota delegation ambushing funds for construction of the prison by demanding more CIP funds for their own islands as part of the deal. Then came the Speaker's less-than-tactful, blunt accusation that Tinian and Rota were "greedy."

It's understandable that Rota and Tinian - having only one representative in the House, being "off-island" members of the legislature, having smaller populations and fewer amenities - occasionally feel paranoid about Saipan. What they don't seem to understand, however, is that Saipan is not merely another island in the Marianas chain, but also serves as the capital of the Commonwealth. As such, much of what is done for, occurs on, Saipan is done not merely for the benefit of the Saipan residents, but also for the residents of Tinian and Rota.

While physical separation demands that a separate power plant, water system, sewer system, and school system be provided regardless of cost, not all services are equally essential. The lack of critical mass dictates that somewhat less vital services such as the hospital, the court system, and the prison system not be provided on each island simply because the expense is unaffordable.

So far, not a single member of either house has emerged as peace-maker, negotiator, elder statesman. What a disappointment! What a shame! Not only in terms of the well-being of the commonwealth, but also in terms of the political future of members of the legislature - particularly those up for re-election this November.

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It's too soon to tell whether there is a peace-maker among the several parties battling about the latest minimum wage increase proposals. The governor has "edicted" that workers on new federal construction projects be paid the U.S. minimum wage. Contractors have objected that their worker contracts don't allow that without amendment. The private sector, as represented by the Saipan Chamber of Commerce, has proposed a gradual increase in the minimum wage, but its members want an accompanying reduction in the benefits they are now required to provide their workers.

A knotty problem that emerges is that if benefits to foreign workers are reduced in proportion to the increase in the minimum wage, the foreign workers will not benefit. They will be as badly off as they were before. Local workers, though, will benefit, since they will receive a net increase in their pay. As has been argued before, foreign workers can be said to already receive the equivalent wage, if all the benefits are taken into consideration - except for those whose employers are deducting housing, meals, and other costs from their already low pay.

A more radical solution - but perhaps a solution to the real problem nonetheless - would be to pass an increase in the minimum wage that applied only to local workers, but at the same time, require that employers pay their foreign workers the full minimum wage without deductions. That would level the playing field, so to speak, for both local and foreign workers. And would certainly be a simpler solution than trying to find a way to compensate local workers for the meals and lodgings given foreign workers.

But whether a new task force will even be formed, as the Chamber has requested, or whether a meaningful solution will be brought forward, is anybody's guess. The problem has existed since foreign workers were first introduced here - as has the problem of rivalry between islands. As is true regarding island rivalry, the question is whether any among the executive or the legislative or the private sector have the maturity - or the will - to work out a meaningful compromise.

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In yet another promotion piece for mining ash on Pagan, <I>Tribune</I> columnist Don Farrell does neither himself nor his readers any favors with his slick salesman technique of telling you only what you want to hear. This past Sunday's column compares the CNMI's opportunity to make money on mining ash to that of Nauru, and all the wealth Nauru and its people acquired in exchange for the mining of its guano - "that made the few people living on or from Nauru the richest people in the world."

But what he doesn't tell you is that Nauru is now bankrupt. There isn't any more guano to mine, no other industry was ever developed, and the people there are now both jobless and broke. Apparently, those who did rake in all that money - the Nauru government included - failed to invest it very wisely.

At the very least, Farrell ought to have cautioned the Marianas Public Land Authority - whom he is exhorting to get on with mining ash on Pagan - about the need to be diligent and prudent about how - and for whom - the alleged profits will be spent.

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<I>Short takes:</I> Seems Guam's school system is still at it - the latest school lunch and breakfast menus, which appeared in the 6/1 issue of the <I>Pacific Daily News</I> twice mentions catsup as an apparent vegetable. Does the CNMI school lunch program do the same thing? At least on Guam, the menu of school lunches is published.

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If newly-appointed Judge Kenneth L. Govendo had his way, there'd be a severe shortage of judges on island. He rashly let drop his opinion that judges whom the electorate had not confirmed for a second term should not be allowed to serve as temporary judges. But the electorate only rejected them for another term, Ken, not for ever sitting on the bench in any capacity. Besides, what with the coconut wireless rumored black-balling of former Presiding Judge Edward Manibusan by the court, the CNMI would be forced to import judges less knowledgeable of the local scene from elsewhere, an expensive and not very satisfactory alternative.

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The CNMI's SARS control/prevention plan includes provision that non-citizens from SARS hot spots may not enter the CNMI, but CNMI citizens (including greencard holders and immediate relatives) may. Does that mean that CNMI citizens, (<I>et. al.</I>), are immune to SARS, whereas non-citizens are not? Has anyone told the Center for Disease Control or the World Health Organization about this weird and wonderful discovery?