

On My Mind

2/20/04

The position being taken by the minority members of the House - that they'd rather wait awhile before joining any of the committees that do much of the actual work in the House - is rather puzzling. As, according to press reports, articulated by Minority Leader Heinz S. Hofschneider, the idea is to let the majority members bear the burden of multiple committee assignments for a while, and when the majority finally cedes that there is too much work, have the minority come to the rescue.

But those "rescued" are not always grateful for or appreciative of their rescue - particularly when their plight has been caused by the rescuer in the first place - as would be the case here. The stance taken by the minority is more apt to cause irritation and resentment, if not anger, than to foster gratitude and good feelings in the majority. Hanging back, and refusing to play, so to speak - for whatever reason - is the behavior of little kids on a playground. It is not a strategy one would expect of seasoned legislators.

Rather, the minority should take their cue from the likes of unsuccessful candidates for the Democratic nomination John Dean and Wes Clark - who each pledged to support whoever won the nomination. They should put aside their disappointments and their differences, and do what they were elected to do: work together for the benefit of those who put them there to begin with.

Such an approach is far more apt to engender cooperation and productivity than the present one.

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While there's been repeated mention lately of the desire, by the garment industry, to have the government reduce the level of the "value added" requirement needed to maintain duty free status, there hasn't been much of an explanation of what it all actually means. In actuality, the story is quite interesting - and the rationale quite reasonable.

At present, General Headnote 3(A) of the Harmonized Tariff Code requires that for goods exported to the United States from the CNMI to qualify as duty free, 70% of the item's value may be foreign-sourced, but 30% of the value must be added within the CNMI. However, for clothing apparel, the percentage of value that must be added is a full 50%.

Recently issued U.S. Customs letter rulings now allows CNMI's garment manufacturers to import material already cut, so that only sewing and assembly are done locally, whereas before, garment factories were required to cut the material on island, as well as put the pieces together. But since the cutting process is one of the more costly components of the total garment value, having it done off island does not leave enough work to be done on the garment to add up to the required 50% "value-added" share of the cost.

Which is why the garment manufacturers are asking that the percentage be lowered to 30%. It would allow them to import cut fabrics, to assemble them and add trim locally, and to still qualify for the Headnote 3(A) exemption for duty free exportation to the U.S.

Nor would the change benefit only the garment manufacturers. Importing cut fabric would almost entirely eliminate the huge quantities of fabric waste now clogging up the solid waste disposal system. With the change more garments would be completed more quickly, which would, in turn, increase revenue as well as open up new jobs to locals, to help with the increase in assembly and trimming work that is expected to occur if the change is made.

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I don't believe in promoting commercial ventures through this space, but today I am going to make an exception for a unique restaurant I know of that is having great difficulties due to the Garapan remodeling project. There are probably other restaurants along the road currently blocked off by wooden barriers (3rd Street) - but this one is unlike the others - it is the only one of its kind. It serves a cuisine that is not available in any other restaurant in the CNMI - at least so far as I know. The restaurant? The Taste of India. It offers buffets at lunch time so that customers can sample a variety of Indian dishes. At dinner the selections are much broader - a taste for every appetite - including vegetarians.

It would be a shame if it went out of business! So, if you've already been there, I'd encourage you to go again. If you haven't, I'd encourage you to try it out - the food is delicious! (And while many entrees are spicy, the cook will reduce the spiciness if asked.) It's open seven days a week, for breakfast, lunch and dinner. See you there?

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Short Takes:

**** Sounds like automobile dealers in the CNMI have succeeded in lobbying the Commerce Department to promote more vehicle sales. There's been a proposal to ban cars more than 10 years old - regardless of condition - from being used as taxis. There's already a ban on using cars as taxis that are hazardous to operate or likely to cause an accident. But apparently that wasn't enough to satisfy auto dealers. They want even more conditions imposed to encourage the purchase of new cars.

Yet many cars more than 10 years old are still in very good condition and at least as safe as most other cars on the road. There is absolutely no justification for banning cars based solely on age.

**** And speaking of the Commerce Department - wouldn't it be better to leave Fermin Atalig as Secretary of Commerce? He doesn't have all that good a history in dealing with funds, as would be required of him as Secretary of Finance.

**** Did you know that the CNMI has 45 sites listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places? Saipan has 29, Rota has 9, and Tinian has 7. Fourteen were listed before 1980; between 1980 and 1990, 25 more were added; between 1990 and 2000, five more were added, and one has been added since. According to the Register web page, "Listing in the historical register honors a historic place by recognizing its importance to community, state or

the nation.” The list of sites can be found at the Register site “cr.nps.gov/nr.” A click on “find listed places” lets you enter the CNMI two letter state code, which then brings up all 45 sites.

-Last but not least: I am not acquainted with the gentleman, but his letter to the editor in today’s

<I>Variety</I> is a good one and should be read by all legislators. A Fabian Indalacio spells out a proposed “oath of office” for members of the legislature. One section of particular note: “I promise to be mindful that if I’m going to vote for any bill, I will vote for the interest of the people and not for any special interests of one person or any particular businessman who is willing to bribe me.”

Two parts of the oath apply equally well to all government officials: “I promise not to abuse public funds but to use them in a manner that will better serve our islands and the people of the Commonwealth, ” and “I promise to stand for what I believe in and I will not be intimidated nor be bullied by any political party who thinks that I’m nothing more than their chess pawn.”

He concludes by promising that if they do good job, “we” will promise to vote for them again. It sure would be nice if they did, and we could!