

On My Mind  
11/24/06

Hearing and reading the many things that people say they are thankful for is humbling. Despite the hardships of power outages, water shortages, low pay, high fuel costs, individual problems, personal tragedies, there ARE many things to be thankful for - from good health and loving family members to friendly neighbors and the pleasures of tropical living. Most of all, perhaps, for the peace in our islands, in contrast to the warfare that plagues parts of Europe, Africa, the Middle East, even neighboring Pacific islands like the Solomons, Fiji, Tonga and the Philippines.

Angelo Villagomez, Beautify CNMI's webmaster, gave thanksgiving an added fillip. In his "Happy Thanksgiving" message to the countless partners, members, volunteers, who've participated in Beautify CNMI's recent activities, he said, "As for me, I'm thankful for all of you. Without you, Beautify CNMI would never have made it out of the starting gates. Look at what we've accomplish in 6 short months! We planted over 1700 trees; we recycled over 260,000 lbs of recyclable material; we've had almost weekly cleanups of beaches and roads - our biggest cleanup on 10/20 attracting over 3,380 volunteers; we've signed an MOA with Balli Steel to remove junk cars and goods at no cost to the government; we've cleaned up and restored tourist areas, both historical and natural; on top of that, we've done this by including segments of our community that don't always get to 'hang out' together."

Isn't that impressive? Gives the CNMI even more to not only be thankful for, but also of which to be proud.

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Another thing the CNMI should be thankful for is that the Lieutenant Governor, now the Acting Governor, seems content to run a "care-taker" government, rather than trying to exert much in the way of leadership. To what extent this is due to the Acting Governor himself, or to the close contact allegedly being maintained by the Governor, is not clear. But it is quite evident that there's not much assertive leadership going on at the moment.

When Governor Fitial was on island, in his office, all kinds of turmoil were created by his frequent "shoot-from-the-hip" pronouncements. Sometimes within the same week, it seemed, he would issue two very different proposals to address the same problem - in an attempt, apparently, to test the waters of public opinion. His shenanigans offered the media much to write and talk about. Since he's been gone for his medical treatments and surgery however, there's been much less - for this columnist, at least - to carp about. Of course, whether such goings-on constitute leadership is another question, but the fact remains that there have been few new ideas, new proposals thrown out from the executive branch in recent weeks. Tim, we thank you.

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Not so praiseworthy is the lack of control over the setting off of fireworks in the CNMI. Normally, while fireworks may be a nuisance, and may have caused some injuries, their use has been seasonal, and not of excessive concern. This year, however, not only does the sale of fireworks appear to have begun far earlier than usual - traditionally they become available around Christmas and New Years - but their sale has included much louder firecrackers than have been heard here before. The noisiest ones are enough to trigger palpitations, if not a heart attack or an

accident, in even the calmest of people.

However, not only do two sections of the CNMI Code contradict each other as to who's in charge, but what control there is seems to be limited to control over fireworks vendors, not over the setting off of fireworks themselves. The contradiction occurs between Title 6 of the CNMI Code, Section 3107, which assigns responsibility for issuing fireworks to the mayor of each village, and Title 2, Section 7336 of the Code, which says that the governor has the responsibility for authorizing fireworks in the CNMI, and the Commissioner of Public Safety the regulatory authority over those categorized as "Class C." (According to the web, Class C includes common fireworks suitable for use by the public and designed primarily to produce visible or audible effects, or both visible and audible effects, by combustion. They may not project or disperse any dangerous fragments such as metal, glass, or brittle plastic.)

Further, the regulations cover only vendors, and specify that the Governor's office must approve the sale thereof, upon which the "office of the Fire Prevention Section must be advised regarding such activities."

The Department of Public Safety has received several complaints about the new "thumper" firecrackers, and is, I've been told, considering revising its regulations. While present regulations only control the vendors, it would seem that DPS has the authority to take the issue further, and regulate not only the sale, but also the use, of fireworks.

Such regulations, I would submit, at the very least should control the hours during which such fireworks may be used, limit their use to more than 50 feet from residents, hospitals, etc., and set controls on the allowable decibel level.

Here's hoping that DPS - despite its heavy load - can find a way to amend the regulations - sooner rather than later! - with emergency regulations, perhaps?

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Those who read yesterday's *Tribune* will be aware that Fred Radewagen, long-time Washington, D.C.-based scholar, writer, observer of island politics, took exception - at great length - to my 11/08 column, just as he did some five years ago, to a similar statement I'd made. Forgive me for mentioning that I find it ironic, to put it mildly, that the *Trib*, which did not print my column, nonetheless devoted nearly an entire page to Radewagen's response to it. (For some reason, Radewagen had cc'd the *Trib* in his e-mail to me.)

I had written, as I have before, that I am not convinced that aligning CNMI political parties with the national parties brings the CNMI much benefit. In the 11/08 column, my comments were intended to address the concerns being expressed by local businessmen and politicians alike that a Democratic Congress did not bode well for the CNMI.

Amusingly, Radewagen chided me for referring to the rest of the U.S. as the "mainland" when I said the Democrats came out ahead in "U.S. mainland" elections, and said surely I did not intend to exclude Hawaii? Apparently he is not aware that the term is in wide use in the CNMI, and that it is not meant to intentionally exclude Hawaii - though there are not a few cases where Hawaii doesn't exactly resemble the rest of the states anyway.

He writes that "...no serious political observer in Washington would believe CNMI's national political party ties will have anything to do with whatever actions Congress might contemplate next year." Which is sort of my point - so why bother?

He goes on to say that I obviously do not understand how Washington operates, and that

except for a few highly publicized issues, people of both parties work together, and that "some compromise is necessary on almost every piece of contentious legislation that is acted into law." But there are tales galore of perhaps less contentious legislation that never gets out of committee - never gets to be voted on "on the floor" - often precisely for partisan reasons.

Radewagen says that if I truly believe party affiliations are a disadvantage, I should be campaigning for a change to party names that bear no resemblance to the national party names - and at heart, I believe that would be a good thing. He also notes, mistakenly, in my opinion, that with the Covenant party now in office in the CNMI, the CNMI has no ties to any national political party in any case - as if! - with the governor insisting that Jack Abramoff is a good friend.....

While he seems to argue that party affiliation doesn't matter much in Congress, nonetheless, he insists that CNMI party affiliation does matter since the CNMI Republican party delegates to the national convention next summer will have nine votes toward the determination of the next Republican candidate for president. Because it is an open race, he said local Republicans are already being wooed by presidential hopefuls or their supporters, and those contacts, Radewagen argues, give the CNMI a means of directly influencing national politics without having to pay a lobbyist hundreds of thousands of dollars. Well, they might - if there were much of a chance of a Republican winning the presidency in 2008, but as things look now, that's a pretty remote possibility.

So far as I'm aware, the CNMI Democratic Party is not affiliated with the national party. If it were, and depending on how many votes a Democratic CNMI delegation would have to the national convention - and whether that contingent happened to vote for the successful candidate for president - Radewagen's scenario could conceivably bring some benefit to the CNMI.

However, CNMI affiliation with national parties still strikes me as doing more harm than good, as well as being largely pointless, given that the local platforms and beliefs so little resemble those of the national parties.

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While Jaime Vergara, in a column in last Monday's *Variety* said it might be "like talking to a robotic voice at the end of a customer service line" I thought his suggestion that a task force be appointed to address the PRAXIS issue - with representatives from all stakeholders - the best solution yet. That way teachers, parents, the community, legislators, Board members and PSS administrators would - one would hope - all receive, see and hear the same information at the same time, which would go far, it seems to me, towards resolving the seemingly escalating conflict.

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Lastly, a question: in an emergency on a austerity holiday, how does one get in touch with any one in government? Can one call the Emergency Management Office? Do people there have contact numbers for government officials in charge of the various offices?

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Movies this week: A new PG-13 action thriller and a new PG comedy; in addition to six hold-overs: three PG-13's - an action adventure, an action drama, and a horror thriller; two PG's - an animated adventure and an animated comedy, and one G, a fantasy comedy - 50% violence, 50% comedy - is there nothing inbetween???

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