

On My Mind  
2/02/07

Two recently proposed bills, one in the House, one in the Senate, could serve as litmus test for voters trying to decide who to re-elect, and who not to, in the upcoming mid-term elections. House Bill 15-196, introduced by Manuel A. Tenorio, would turn six of the CNMI's 14 paid holidays into non-paid holidays, and also proposes a cut in tax-rebates. (Tax rebates, it should be noted, are a government gift, not an entitlement.) The result, according to Tenorio, would generate enough savings to cancel the need for alternating austerity Fridays. So far, HB 15-196 has not even made it out of the House.

Of course, austerity Fridays are supposed to end in September - just before elections - but I wouldn't count on it, or if they are ended, on their staying that way.

Senate Bill 15-76, introduced by Maria T. Pangelinan, calls for some much needed reform in the retirement system and its benefits, making the program more rational and more viable financially. Initially rejected by the House, it was re-introduced and has now passed the Senate a second time. House members are trying to pass a less restrictive bill that would retain many of the costly provisions of the present retirement program.

Both bills offer sensible, logical and cost-effective routes toward a more fiscally-responsible government. I would venture to say that Tenorio's bill could go even further - there's no reason why even more government holidays couldn't be declared payless holidays. Nineteen austerity Fridays are scheduled through the end of September. Even if nine or ten government holidays were declared unpaid holidays, instead of only six, that would still leave government employees better off than they are now.

Pangelinan's bill would affect mostly government employees, since in addition to requiring the Fund to operate more responsibly, it would cut some of the more extravagant benefits in the present system.

Voters should keep a close eye on how members of both houses vote on these bills. It will give a clear indication of which members are more interested in protecting their own interests, and which are more concerned with the health of the Commonwealth as a whole. In the meantime, congratulations to both Tenorio and Pangelinan for introducing such carefully prepared and practical approaches to solving some of the CNMI's economic problems.

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On the other hand, the House Legislative Initiative (H.L.I. 15-8) that would make the Attorney General an elected position does not, in my opinion, resolve the issues with that office. As has been shown in the case of retention of judges in the CNMI court system, people are inclined to vote, not based on the ability of the "candidate," but on purely personal reasons. That is not a sound basis on which to select judges and it is not a sound basis on which to select an attorney general.

A better approach would be to have the legislature take its responsibilities more seriously, since the approval of both houses is necessary for the appointment of the AG. In addition, similarly to the Public Auditor, the AG could be protected from gubernatorial displeasure by making the incumbent removable only for cause, and only by the affirmative vote of two-thirds of the members of each house.

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I admire Representative Stanley Torres for his fearlessness - his willingness to speak out and to heck with the consequences. It would be nice, though, if he were a little more selective in the causes he took up, a little more careful in the research behind them.

His latest is about members of the executive branch who allegedly receive "over-the-cap" salaries. It may seem unfair, on the surface, and admittedly, the practice of awarding employees such salaries lends itself all too easily to abuse. Yet there is also the market to consider. If one wants people in leadership positions who are educated, effective, capable, and experienced, it is usually necessary to pay a salary that is competitive, one way or another, with what those people can earn elsewhere.

That competitiveness doesn't have to be on a straight dollar-for-dollar basis, however. The CNMI does not have seasons that necessitate different wardrobes for winter, summer, spring and fall. It does not require the insulation in homes, the heating systems and the fuel costs that accompany them. There is no sales tax. Other taxes are rebated. It offers a beautiful tropical island setting, and a location that serves as spring-board for travel throughout the Pacific and east Asia. All of those are worth something too.

The CNMI should not be paying exorbitant salaries, but if the job requirements cannot be met without an "over-the-cap" salary, so be it. I'd rather have quality, thank-you.

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One last legislative issue for this week: The CNMI has cut off its nose to spite its face, as they say, when the governor actually signed into law Senate Bill 15-62, which will require whoever takes over the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation to fork over \$22.75 million dollars in rebates to CUC customers.

Strangely enough, according to the report in the *Saipan Tribune* earlier this week, the joint conference committee working on the bill, "found that repayment [of CUC's debt to CDA] may discourage companies from bidding on the planned privatization of CUC's power division. In addition, the debt service requirement would be added to the cost of production and may be passed on to consumers, thereby increasing the electric rate for consumers." Their solution? Waive only half the debt, and have the other half be given back to the customers in the form of rebates. Excuse me? That still means whoever takes over has to come up with that \$22.75 million from somewhere. Where do those legislators think it's going to come from??????

And the governor actually signed the bill, too. So I guess we can't look for someone to take over CUC for a while yet - not until the next legislature, hopefully, annuls the law - with enough votes to over-ride a gubernatorial veto, should the governor insist on perpetuating the folly.

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Short takes:

According to an article in Wednesday's *Tribune*, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has some \$92 million available in loans to state utilities. Another \$6.4 million is available from the USDA in grant funds to support rural economic development efforts. Though recipients of both programs are listed, including non-states such as Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico, the CNMI is

not present on either list. Was no one here aware of the availability of these funds? If not, why not? And if they were, why isn't the CNMI among the recipients? Does the CNMI need better grant writers? It obviously qualifies as a rural area. And its utilities are sadly in need of development. Let's hope these weren't one-time programs, and the CNMI can get its share of the pie in the next round.....

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Let's also hope that the omission of any mention of Beautify CNMI! in the announcement of the Division of Environmental Quality's beautiful village contest was an oversight. Particularly since it also is tied to Beautify CNMI!'s re-cycling goal of providing curb pick-up to the entire island, surely this fits right into the Beautify CNMI! campaign, and should be conducted in coordination with other BC members?

And speaking of beautifying the CNMI, I came across two groups doing clean up on their own just this past week: a group from the Japanese organization ISA CNMI doing a meticulous clean-up along the Micro Beach shoreline - they were even picking up the numerous cigarette butts! - and a private group cleaning one of the roads in Tanapag Village. It's catching!!!!

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Those who criticize the U.S. for not providing enough information and education regarding citizenship to the people of the Northern Marianas prior to the signing of the Covenant don't know their history very well. As well known writer Bill Stewart explained just recently in one of his columns, and Sam McPhetres has also said, over and over, the U.S. was forced to remain impartial during the debate on the Covenant, lest other members of the U.N. Security Council, particularly France and the Soviet Union, accuse the U.S. of colonialism, and block the whole process.

Though admittedly, the U.S. could have done more prior to November 1986, when that portion of the Covenant went into effect. But the U.S. clearly had no idea of the impact of that event on the CNMI - President Ford's signature on the enabling document took place without ceremony.

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A breakthrough has occurred, thanks to the efforts of the Friends of the Arts, who have volunteered their services to keep the Arts Council Gallery open outside government work hours for the duration of the present retrospective exhibit of the works of banana-print creator Doug Rankin. The gallery will remain open until 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. It will also be open from 9:00 a.m. til noon on Saturdays. Thank-you, Friends of the Arts!

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I've made lots of negative comments about Hollywood Theater's choice of films, it being the only movie house on island, but last week's takes the cake. After a week's normal showing, management saw fit to put "The Queen" - not only contender for a top film award, but with its starring actress also up for a top film award - into the least popular slot of all - one show a day at 7:00 p.m. And after only two weeks, management removed the film altogether. What kind of businessperson takes the potentially most popular item in stock, and places it in a location where sales are guaranteed to be low and then, removes it after only two weeks? What COULD they have been thinking?

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Movies this week: three of the top money makers, two highly rated older movies, one of the top five opening this week and one RP import - or 5 PG-13's, 1 PG, 1 R. A good ratio, and

while they're not my favorites, they do all rank high on one score or another.