

On My Mind  
6/08/07

It always irks me when bigwigs from Washington, D.C. come on their whirlwind tours of the CNMI expecting to "understand" its issues by staying at the Hyatt, visiting only pre-groomed sites, and meeting only selected individuals, as Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne just did. However, thanks perhaps to briefings by his Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs David Cohen, and perhaps to his own character and personality as well, Kempthorne's unassuming comments to the media after less than a day's presence on island, reflected an admirable understanding and empathy.

His comments on Congress' proposed immigration bill, his expression of the Department's concern for fair treatment of foreign workers, have been covered elsewhere. But what no one seems to have picked up on are his repeated comments on how beautiful he found Saipan - from the moment he looked out over the Hyatt's groomed gardens when he first got up after a late arrival the night before. The island's beauty is an obvious tourist draw, he said more than once. (Fortunately for the CNMI, the flame trees are in glorious bloom!)

Here is a sophisticated, experienced traveler exclaiming again and again about Saipan's natural attractiveness. That should be a wake-up call to all those believe that economic development comes with pouring more concrete, clearing more areas, blocking more vistas, destroying more and more of the island's greenery. And it should serve as welcome support to all those who support and believe in Beautify CNMI's goal and purposes - to make the island more beautiful to all who arrive here.

The question is, will the Marianas Visitors Authority capitalize on Kempthorne's enthusiasm? Will it persuade them that a beautiful, healthy environment, of itself, is highly marketable? Will the administration and the legislature - in their search for revenue - restructure their priorities and put more emphasis on the environment, on keeping the lagoon free of sediment and contamination, on the control of rain and flood waters, on controlling stray dogs and picking up dead animals? Or will everyone just go on as before? Ignoring the "clue" to attracting more tourists that Kempthorne offered so freely?

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It's pretty much taken for granted that the CNMI's major sport is politics. People are proud of it, revel in it - and are consumed by it. But the game of politics has gone far astray, according to Father Fran Hezel, whose latest essay, "Island Politics," has just been published in the *Micronesian Counselor*. Writes Hezel: "Once it [politics] was used to describe elections and the candidacy of individuals for elected public office - the 'art or science of winning or maintaining control of the government' is the way my dictionary defines politics. But now the word embraces all manner of things...Like a spreading fungus, it threatens to infect everything."

And while it is difficult to separate a person and his private interests from his public office, it must be done, or "the public will never be able to hold their elected officials accountable for fulfilling their responsibility to the public." Conflict of interest laws are needed, in addition to enforcement of those on the books, in order to deal with this dilemma, Hezel says.

Moreover, Hezel writes, the effort that politicians spend on getting elected, and once elected, on getting re-elected, consumes enormous amounts of time and energy. "If somehow this energy could be converted to positive programs, imagine what the government systems and

the public services would be like. If it could be magically transformed somehow into electrical power, we could keep the lights on for months at a time with the power generated."

He asks, "Is it too Utopian to suggest that their first and major concern ought to be not so much to capture the vote as to capture a vision of what they want their country to look like? The first and most important task at hand, after all, is to build a nation [or in the case of the CNMI, a "state"]."

"Politics provides much more than a good income and some fame; it offers the satisfaction of knowing one is in charge (even if that is not entirely the case). Once an individual holds a high elective office, it is difficult to surrender that power and sit quietly on the sidelines as others engage in the excitement of the political game," he acknowledges.

But, he argues, "Politics means care of the *polis* - the nation-state and its citizens - even before it means gaining and maintaining public office. It does not mean enrichment at the expense of the national treasury, but dedication to the public good even at personal expense. Politics should mean not a face-saving defense of the status quo, no matter how bad the status quo is, but a singular commitment to spurring the improvement of the government and the vital public services it provides for people."

However, he warns, "If the elected official's concern for retaining his position overrides his concern for the genuine public good and the future of his nation or state, he will yield to popular pressure and allow himself to be led rather than to lead. The result will be disastrous for his people in the long run....People may get what they think they want, but this isn't always what they need, as any parent or anyone who has ever spent time in a classroom knows."

"Once upon a time, the word politics was invested with a nobility that it seems to have lost in our day. Politics, as it is used now, is an excuse for shifty behavior and dubious principles, he says. Hezel concludes, "As their [politicians'] energies are absorbed more and more in maintaining their political support base, matters of greater importance, such as the improvement of government services and national development may be relegated to an after-thought and handled on an as-time-allows basis."

A cautionary tale on which voters and politicians alike would do well to ponder.  
The full text of Hezel's article:  
<http://www.micsem.org/pubs/counselor/frames/islandpoliticsfr.htm>.

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Short takes:

Most outrageous story of the week: the coconut wireless tale that the administration is encouraging a foreign investor to establish a "marijuana allowed" area in Marpi, as an international tourist attraction.

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A better idea: the story in a recent *Pacific Daily News* issue about a Hawaii firm "mining" deep water there, desalinating it, and then selling it for use in everything from beer to face cream. Desalinated deep seawater allegedly has the advantage of being free of modern impurities and pollution. A natural for the CNMI with the Marine Trench just off-shore. But, under present business conditions? A tough call.

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Another revenue-generating idea: the letter to the editor in the *Marianas Variety* earlier this week from an incoming tourist saying he'd be "more than happy to pay for conservation fees

that help support and expand protected areas in developing countries." He was referring to Palau's Protected Area Network which proposes to charge fees to divers that would be used to defray the cost of maintaining designated protected areas. So why can't the CNMI do the same?

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An incomprehensibly missed opportunity: According to the two local papers, at any rate, CNMI's governor signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. Geological Survey in the privacy of his office, despite the fact that the U.S. Secretary of the Interior, under which the USGS falls, was on island, offering the governor a rare chance to enhance a "photo opportunity" surrounded by loyal staff and supporters, of which the governor is so fond, by the added presence of a high-ranking U.S. Cabinet officer. Was it a deliberate snub? Careless oversight? Or?

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A big thank-you to Marian Aldan-Pierce for persuading the contractors and everyone else involved to save those red shrubs along the Beach Path extension in the Lower Base area. Goes to prove that the right word in the right place at the right time can work wonders.

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A big thank-you as well to the editor of the *Saipan Tribune* for his insightful and inside take on an issue that has many local businessmen worried. Jayvee Vallejera wrote his column in today's issue on "The myth of mass migration from the CNMI," explaining clearly and logically just why he believes it won't happen. It won't happen, that is, unless the CNMI continues to treat its foreign workers poorly. "In the end, it will be up to the Commonwealth if it wants these workers to stay. Creating a vibrant economy that provides jobs and livelihood to people will ensure that workers will stay." He warns, however, that "Doing otherwise will leave the CNMI with exactly what it wished for: non-residents who have no other choice but to stay here because they have nowhere else to go - essentially the dregs of the workforce...."

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A question for the island's many legal beagles: with, apparently, two different petitions circulating for recall of the governor, each listing different justifications, is there any way that the two could be combined, strengthening each other's chances of garnering enough votes to get the question on the ballot?

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And a word to not-yet-registered voter-wanna-bees: the Election Commission has set up a table inside the Price-Costco store to enable people who have not yet done so to register to vote. Registration may be done every Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. (People can also register at the Election Commission on Capital Hill.) People need to show a birth certificate, valid passport or naturalization ID, have lived in the CNMI for 120 days, be over 18, and have no felony convictions. People who've moved from one election district to another since they last voted, should transfer their registration; those who did not vote in the last elections, are required to re-register in order to be eligible to vote in the upcoming election in November. Deadline for registration is September 14, 2007.

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New movies: 2 PG-13's: "Surf's Up," and "Ocean's 13"; one R: "Hostel 2," for a total of one PG, 4 PG 13's, 3 R's. The <EM>Variety</EM> listing did not appear because a new contract is still being negotiated between parties, I was told.