

On My Mind
6/29/07

With all the talk about a government that's too big, expenses that are out of control, districts that are no longer equitably apportioned, candidates who'd rather run as independents, and voters demanding changes in the Constitution, the law, and their candidates, maybe it wouldn't be too inappropriate to consider something even more radical, something that gets to the very heart of the problem. Instead of debating the merits of 12 districts instead of 7, of increasing or decreasing House membership, maybe what ought to be debated is whether the CNMI needs a bi-cameral legislature at all. Whether it needs a governor and a cabinet, or whether some version of a "city" manager or county governance plan wouldn't do as well.

Maybe, in short, it's time to ask for some 902 discussions on amending the Covenant to abolish the present form of CNMI government, and re-structuring it under something more in keeping with the size of its population. There is no state in the U.S. with so small a population; nor, despite the projected Marine build-up, can the CNMI ever expect to equal even the smallest state in population. There probably aren't many counties with so small a population - while there are hundreds of cities with far larger populations. Neither are governed by bi-cameral legislatures, a governor and his cabinet - nor are they going bankrupt.

The observation that the CNMI does not need the governance superstructure it now has is not new, certainly, but it has never been pursued. Perhaps it is high time that it is. Consider the money that would be saved if one did not have to finance 27 members of the legislature, the governor and all his staff, the lieutenant governor and all his staff, the many special assistants to the governor and all their staff. There might almost be enough to actually build a bridge to Tinian!

Of course, the governor, members of the legislature, other affected parties, would be out of a job. But many people are losing their jobs as it is. Why not some of the people at the top as well? And there will still be a need for some government employees - employees, one would hope, who would actually function.

It would probably take a couple of years to come up with an alternative, get it approved, and actually implement it. But isn't it time to begin that process? To call, perhaps, another public forum and form a task force to work on coming up with some options?

In the meantime, there's a rather depressingly different kind of scenario being circulated on the coconut wireless: that the administration and its supporters (some of them not so obvious/-visible) are doing everything they can to increase the economic suffering of the general population so that, when given the choice, those long-suffering economically-depressed people will eagerly vote for the golden promises held out by the supporters of a casino on Saipan.

How else can one explain, for instance, the incomprehensible fact that Congresswoman Cinta Kaipat's punitive labor bill passed the House with NO dissenting votes? How can one explain that Kaipat, enterprising, assertive, intelligent, educated, open-minded, is actually sponsoring such a counter-productive piece of legislation? How else can one explain that the suggestions and comments of neither the Saipan Chamber of Commerce, nor the Hotel Association of the NMI, nor individual witnesses were listened to, acted upon, incorporated into the bill?

Then there's the more convoluted scenario out there: that the administration's reason for

imposing more and more hurtful (in)action on the people is so that come 2011, the year that the Covenant provision protecting land alienation expires, people will be eager to see the restriction abolished so that they can actually sell their land. More significantly, goes the scenario, the Director of Public Lands would be instructed to sell off public lands - on some of which big hotels are now sitting - at below-market value, to be bought up by a "conspirator" who would then turn around and re-sell them for a huge profit, to be shared with the government officials. Of course, that only makes sense if one assumes that the present administration would still be in power, or that the next administration would be equally devious.....

But to those who are upset at the terms of House Bill 15-38, I would offer the following silver lining to the cloud: even if it passes the Senate as well, and is signed into law by the governor (who's already said he supports it), it is only a law. That means it can be amended or revoked - a not unlikely occurrence, given the legislature's past record in dealing with so-called labor reform bills. And with the most onerous of the provisions - calling for mandatory exits of foreign workers - not going into effect until January 1, 2008, many of the present House members will no longer be in office.

So, it's not like it's cast in concrete that the law will stay in effect for any protracted period of time.

Like a voice crying out in the wilderness, former long-time Saipan resident, economist and author Bill Stewart has repeatedly appealed to the legislature, to NMI Retirement Fund members, to the Retirement Fund itself, to support, protect and defend the Retirement Fund from emasculation at the hands of the administration - to no avail.

Stewart has explained, again and again and in great detail to all of the above, as well as in numerous articles in the papers, just how dire the consequences are of the refusal by the administration to pay its share of the contributions to the Retirement Fund upon which all Retirement Fund members depend for support when they retire. It won't be there for very long, he has stated in no uncertain terms, unless the government starts paying back all of the money it owes the Fund.

Why hasn't there been a stream of letters in the papers demanding that the government pay its debt? demanding that the Fund pursue the suit it once filed seeking payment? demanding that the members of the legislature recall their shortsighted law preventing the Fund from trying to live within its means? Why has no publicly-minded person come forth to mobilize Fund members, to urge public outcry, to demand accountability?

It is no doubt true that many members of the Retirement Fund are of a generation for whom confrontation was not acceptable behavior, who are not accustomed to such public confrontations as would be involved, who may be neither comfortable nor familiar with the strategies required to voice their protests. Some may be scattered over various parts of the rest of the U.S., perhaps out of touch, without a network of peers through whom and with whom to communicate their concerns. Some may harbor an abiding faith that surely the legislators would not let the man'amko down.

In the absence of any decisive action on the part of the Retirement Fund Board - which is,

after all, accountable to Retirement Fund members - the question is not really, "Who will speak for the members of the Retirement Fund?" Stewart has done so often, eloquently, and ardently. The real question is "Who will take up their cause? Who is ready, willing and able to act for them?"

Short takes:

Well, I goofed again, but have decided that rather than sending out e-mails correcting the error, I'll just correct it on my web page, and readers can get it from there. Last week's error: an incomplete cite to the Law Revision Commission's page, where the table of contents for the *Commonwealth Register* is found. The correct citation is < www.cnmilaw.org >.

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Other left-overs from last week: It turns out someone IS doing something celebratory in observance of the CNMI's brilliantly blossoming Flame Trees (at least this year): Flame Tree TV Productions, producer of the Channel 2 News, is sponsoring a photo contest for Flame Trees, working with an Ad Hoc Committee at MVA. Deadline for submission is the end of June: photos can be emailed to kspn2news@gmail.com or dropped by its third floor studio in the Marianas Business Plaza (on a cd please). Winner will be announced during its coverage of the Liberation Day parade on July 4th.

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Also, for energy conservation do-it-yourselfers: I've been informed that Family Outlet on Middle Road sells tankless gas water heaters. Says my source, "I bought one on Friday, had it installed on Saturday, and now we can take hot showers for the first time since the electric rates went up." How does it work? "The gas burner in the box ignites only when a hot water faucet is turned on. The igniter is powered by two size D batteries and the gas supply I'm using is a small tank the size used for BBQ grills. I'm told that amount of gas should last several months. The cost of the heater is only \$70!" Sounds well worth checking into!

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Multi-talented Barbara Sher is offering - for free! - suggestions of simple, inexpensive games parents can play with their children in each Friday's issue of the *Marianas Variety*, with more games available on her excellent web site < <http://www.gameslady.com> >. The activities, she says, can all be done with things easily found around the house, like newspapers, string and milk cartons. But readers should let the paper know they find her projects useful, if they are to continue to appear.

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- Isn't it peculiar that the *Marianas Variety* hasn't carried a single word about PTI's problems and the loss of connection to the internet this past week? If one only read that paper, one would never know what was happening and why - unless, of course, one received the information PTI has been sending out via e-mail to its customers. The shut-down of internet access is news of some importance, isn't it? Could one call its non-publication censorship?

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New Movies: "Ratatouille," rated G, and "Live Free or Die Hard," rated PG-13, for a total of one G, three PG's, three PG 13's, and one R. Nor are they all bottom-of-the-barrel, for a change....