

On My Mind

7/20/07

Let me introduce a new word to the island vocabulary: dichotomous (deye-kot-o-mus). The dictionary defines it as "divided or dividing into two parts." It seems many people are only able to view situations, conditions, as divided into two parts - or, to put it another way, as being only black or white, with no shades of grey in between. Take the issue of municipal councils, which the legislature is considering abolishing. Their approach is dichotomous: either abolish them or keep them. But the councils exist in three places. Why is it necessary to apply the same approach to all three? What about abolishing the municipal council on Saipan, where it does not seem to do much but pass resolutions, and allow Rota and Tinian to keep theirs, where the councils seem to be more productive?

Then there's the issue of the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation's hiring 19 more employees over the last nine months. (They hired 49, but let 30 go, leaving a net of 19 new hires). Has anyone checked into what skills those 19 new employees bring to CUC? How those 19 relate to the over-all staffing needs of CUC? Or to the 30 that were let go? Would anyone argue that CUC needs more staff in the accounting department? (Of course, whether CUC couldn't have cross-trained existing employees isn't answered either.) But condemning CUC without a clearer understanding of what was involved is again an example of dichotomous thinking.

Take the more sensitive issue of foreign worker rights. Apparently for fear that any change of status will bring voting rights, CNMI lawmakers, the Chamber of Commerce, the administration, have all spoken against any improvement in their status at all. It **IS** possible to improve the status of foreign workers, and not give them voting rights. One needn't deprive them of one because of a fear of the other. That's dichotomous thinking! Moreover, as Dr. Khorram points out in writing about the Golden Rule in today's *Saipan Tribune*, would those lawmakers, Chamber members, administration members, be happy if they were to take a job outside the United States, and found themselves under the same restrictions foreign workers are forced to observe in the CNMI?

Another sensitive issue seemingly being considered only dichotomously: Article XII. People are arguing either that it should be abolished or that it be kept. But what about continuing Article XII so far as public land is concerned, but not private land? The decision need not be one or the other. There **ARE** grey areas in between! They are also arguing as to whether to allow lease extensions or not. Again, the decision need not be one or the other. There are alternatives.

There are very few situations in life, I would contend, that present only black-or-white options, only two choices. People limit their options when they reduce their search for solution to either-or conditions. The challenge is to find the right shade of grey, the right parts and sub-parts that constitute reasonable results. That takes imagination and creativity - and might even take some research and consultation - but to make decisions without considering alternatives is fool-hardy at best.

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On the subject of Article XII - the CNMI Constitutional article which restricts land ownership to people of Northern Marianas descent - a factor which does not seem to have been

considered in the discussions about lengthening lease terms is whether there will still be eligible persons of Northern Marianas descent to take possession of the land by the time the lease expires.

That concern has been expressed before, but seemingly not in the present context. The CNMI Constitution defines a person of Northern Marianas descent as a citizen or national of the United States who is of at least one-quarter Northern Marianas Chamorro or Northern Marianas Carolinian blood or a combination thereof - or an adopted child of a person of Northern Marianas descent if adopted while under the age of eighteen years.

Theoretically, in other words, the grandchildren of today's mixed marriage couples would be the last generation eligible to hold title to land in the CNMI under present law. Ninety-nine year leases, then, might be problematic.

Also problematic is what happens to improvements to land made by lessees at the end of a lease term. Would the lessor be required to pay the lessee for those improvements?

The terms of Article XII have already received extensive scrutiny in the courts. But it looks like lots more will be forthcoming, if some answers to present anomalies are not developed in the not too distant future.

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The enlightening effects of off-island travel were re-enforced this past week by an e-mail I received from a reader who had just returned from a trip to Hong Kong and had come across some rather startling observations in an issue of the *South China Post*. To quote: "When one of the top Chinese government officials was criticized for the Chinese government not being very responsive to implementing environmentally friendly uses of water and energy, he had a very interesting response. He said in essence, 'China has done more for mitigating environmental impact than any country on earth. China's one child policy has meant that 500,000,000 children were not born, and therefore their environmental impact not felt.'

**"This points out the real truth that environmental impact is at its root a people problem** [emphasis added].... i.e., too many people for sustaining the environment. However it seems to be politically incorrect to make this point and push for population controls in the way there is a push for "green" technologies. Ultimately no matter how 'green' we become, the pressure of numbers will degrade the environment. At current rates of world population growth we can expect a doubling by the end of this century."

Food for thought, indeed! Though that information doesn't bring immediate benefit, it sure expands one's consciousness! And puts into an entirely different light China's seemingly harsh policy in limiting families to only one child. Of course, one could wish that the emphasis had not been on MALE children - concerns have already been voiced about what will happen in China with such an unbalanced population when those single male children reach adulthood.....

It also adds another aspect to concerns about sustainability, a healthy environment, global warming: that fostering family planning offers yet another avenue for reducing the threats to the environment. And, since large families are seen as necessary to survival in underdeveloped countries, that helping those countries achieve better economies would also result in smaller families.

More China facts gleaned by my friend from the *South China Post*: China's economy has grown 11% so far this year. China currently has a \$1,330,000,000,000 surplus of US\$. China shipped 40,000,000 containers to US ports last year.

Granted, the paper appears on the web, but how many of us search it out? Despite

technological advances, seeing things for one's self has not lost its value. Off-island travel offers infinite opportunities to observe different ways of thinking, of learning, of doing, of building, of generating power, of earning a living, of getting things done. One has merely to keep one's eyes and ears open. Additionally, the benefit of bringing back new perspectives to this tiny speck in the Pacific is immeasurable.

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A new perspective I tried to introduce a few weeks ago disappointingly got only two responses. I had suggested the CNMI consider declaring bankruptcy, and forming a different political structure - along the lines of city manager or such, consulting with the U.S. via Covenant Section 902 in the process. One reader had forgotten that the CNMI's bicameral legislature is a Covenant requirement. It is. The other (an attorney) informed me that under federal bankruptcy law, a state, commonwealth, or territory cannot declare bankruptcy; only a municipality or county can do so. (All the more reason to change the status of the CNMI!)

I can understand that the people of the CNMI might not be very happy to be left out of the various arenas in which they now are entitled to participate by virtue of being a Commonwealth: the national governors' conferences, the Pacific Island leaders' meetings, the Department of Interior's several programs for Pacific entities. Nor would they be happy to be left out of the assorted federal grant programs to which the CNMI is entitled because it is "like a state."

But just as the leaders of the CNMI were creative in crafting the unique status of Commonwealth for the CNMI, could not present leaders be as creative in crafting something more appropriate for the CNMI, now that it is clear that a large and bi-cameral form of government simply cannot be sustained? The CNMI is already unique in its political status. There is no reason that it cannot remain unique under a slightly different internal political structure.

A challenge for Sam McPhetres social issues class at Northern Marianas College? The basis of a grant from the Humanities Council? A topic for next year's Covenant Day observance? One way or another, the size of the CNMI government must be cut. It would be nice if it could be done in an intelligent, orderly and reasoned way towards a permanent solution, rather than as a hasty response to an ever-growing financial crisis.

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Last but not least: Former Tanapag and CNMI Teacher of the Year Barbara Gilles once had her class paint a mural on an outside wall of the Tanapag school. Over the years, the paint has faded, and interest has been expressed in repainting the mural in her memory. Anyone interested in volunteering to do the actual work or contributing the necessary materials please e-mail me at < [ruth.tighe@pticom.com](mailto:ruth.tighe@pticom.com) >.

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Three new movies this week: "I now pronounce you Chuck & Larry", PG-13; "Captivity," R, and "Hairspray," G; of which the first two scrape the bottom of the barrel, according to the site < [www.rottentomatoes.com](http://www.rottentomatoes.com) >, for a total of one R, 6 PG-13's, and 2 G's.