

On My Mind
11/30/07

Now that the dust has settled, sort of, it's time to take a closer look at the results of the elections, and at some of the implications thereof. There was, at least in some quarters, high hope that there would be a major shift in the composition of the legislature, bringing with it the fresh air of reform. Though some new and promising candidates did make it - most notably political-correctness-defying Tina Sablan - the percentage was not nearly as high as had been hoped. Instead, voters returned any number who'd been there before.

The question then becomes, what, if anything, can be done to ensure a greater proportion of reform-minded legislators, if not now, then two years from now? First off, it should be noted that there is no pre-requisite, no requirement - other than that a candidate be 21, in the case of the House, 25 in the case of the Senate, and be a voter and resident of the CNMI for 3 or 5 years, respectively - for becoming a legislator; that a position of such awesome responsibilities as writing the laws of the land, enacting a budget for the entire Commonwealth, ensuring the welfare of the people of the community, has, in short, no other pre-requisites than age and residency.

The law requires that members of the medical, legal, engineering, teaching and accounting professions all complete a minimum of 14 or more years of formal schooling - in some cases much more - and pass qualifying exams and become licensed before they are allowed to practice. Yet legislators - who make the laws that spell out the criteria, salaries, benefits, and working conditions for members of those professions - are not themselves required to meet any such criteria.

It doesn't help that most members of the legislature - past and present - seem to believe that they need no orientation or training on how to function, how to better to meet their responsibilities, how to understand and deal with the issues, that they know it all. In fact, past efforts offering such input and advice have consistently been met with apathy and disinterest.

Granted, the CNMI has, in the past, seen many good legislators who may not have had more than twelve years of formal schooling, if that. But more simply wasn't available on island. Today, opportunities for further education are far more readily accessible. If the CNMI is to have effective governance, yesterday's criteria for legislators will no longer be sufficient.

The problem is that any change affecting the legislature must go through the legislature. Could its members be persuaded to require that future legislators have at least a B.A.? That they undergo orientation regarding legislative management? That they receive background information on issues brought before them? That they belong to and participate in the activities of either the National Conference of State Legislators or the Council of State Governments - highly regarded organizations which provide workshops and materials on the function of legislators as well as on subjects legislators are apt to encounter during their term of office? (Unfortunately, the annual conferences of the two

organizations were held earlier this month - the Council of State Governments holding its Western Legislative Academy specifically for new legislators the first week of November in Colorado Springs.)

Could legislators be persuaded to require future legislators to attend - and report back on - such sessions?

If reform is what is wanted, it would appear that what will be needed between now and the next election is a campaign to persuade the general public that, if the legislators won't do it themselves, it is up to the voters to take up the challenge and to make sure that the candidates they support ARE educated, ARE willing to improve their skills, ARE informed about the issues.

Since machinations are already under way to identify and determine who the candidates will be in the '09 gubernatorial elections, it would not appear too early for everyone else to be thinking about the next administration as well, and how it will function, what actions needed to restore government to a more rational, functional basis.

The first action I'd take would be to rescind the requirement that government officials wear a tie at all times while "on duty." It may seem a silly dress code, not worth bothering about, and admittedly, in some settings the wearing of more formal attire does affect performance for the better. But in this tropical climate, the wearing of a tie and long pants is not customary, and doing so carries no history of effectiveness.

No other Pacific entity that I know of imposes such a silly, expensive, artificial requirement on its officials. Even federal officials do not wear ties on any but the most formal occasions.

And if ties were not worn, it should lead to a lowering of aircon settings, saving the government fuel and money besides.

The second action would be to rescind the governor's authority to appoint or control personnel within government agencies. The governor appoints agency heads, but they, together with civil service regulations, should determine with whom they will work in meeting their agency's responsibilities.

There are doubtless many more candidates for action - for example, the law adding barriers to the awarding of major procurement contracts - that could perhaps even be corrected by the new legislature coming into office, without having to await a change in administration, or the "right" of government employees to withdraw retirement savings after 15 years, instead of 10 as was a somewhat more reasonable limit, though also rather generous.

I hope someone is making a list.....

Short takes:

Twenty-one years ago this week, the CNMI was hit by Supertyphoon Kim, and left

without power for weeks. As those here at the time may remember, it was not an easy time. With the present power situation so precarious, does it not occur to anyone that the CNMI may well be approaching another prolonged period of no power - this time all of its own making? What is it with CUC, the administration, the legislature, that they continue to bicker in the face of disaster, that they refuse to come together for the sake of the rest of the community, and the businesses, and tourism and the economy? Do they all plan to leave island when the power plant finally goes down for good?

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Today the legislature is supposed to debate, and hopefully, decide on a major economic development venture, the expansion of the LaoLao Bay resort, that just might trigger the beginning of recuperation for the CNMI economy. Yet some (see Senator Louis Crisostomo's letter to the editor in today's *Marianas Variety*) do not seem to understand the value of "the bird in the hand" versus "the bird in the bush." The legislature should approve this venture - and the sooner the better - as reassurance to other investors that the CNMI is hospitable to them, as well as because it will be good for the economy.

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Of course, the governor's calling an investor names because, while having already invested large amounts in rehabilitating the Nauru building, the investor has not yet been able to start up his business, doesn't help matters. The *Variety*, earlier this week, had reported that the governor accused "We Manage Calls Inc." of being insincere. Wouldn't it have been more helpful to consult with the investor, and ask if there was anything the administration could do to move matters along?

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Kudos, on the other hand, to the Retirement Fund for having finally gotten up the nerve to take a stance on the vulnerability of its assets and saying, "No more!" Some people wanting to retire may have to wait a while, but it's high time that the Fund protect its members and its assets. Both local papers carried full page notices this week of the Funds' actions and the reasons therefor.

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Kudos as well to the U.S. Army whose light along Middle Road, by the Army Reserve - which I've just noticed - are prime examples of good lighting. They do not, inefficiently, light up the area around and above them, but only the area on the ground, as intended. And they don't shine in the eyes of drivers, since the lights are shielded. Nor do they add to the ambient light that makes it more difficult to see the night sky.

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New movies: none. But that's ok. There's not only a good mix at the moment, but several are even worth watching.....

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