

On My Mind  
12/04/09

The final count won't be known until three days after this goes out, but there is, sad to say, little doubt as to the outcome. Unless some miracle occurs, the November 23<sup>rd</sup> gubernatorial run-off results will stand despite the addition of the absentee ballots, leaving the current governor still in office. While the opponents' use of the spelling of cHAnge as part of their publicity was quite clever - i.e., Heinz and Arnold - and their election would have meant change from the present regime - the touted promise of real "change" was not so persuasive. Both have been in office any number of years, without effecting major change; whether they would have actually brought any meaningful change if they'd won is, of course, unknowable.

It was also disappointing that all four of the independent candidates who won in the House capitulated, and joined the Covenant party. The Party must have deep pockets, to convince every one of the Independents to abandon the stance on which s/he had based his/her campaign and appealed to his/her constituents. Nor does it say much for the integrity of those former "Independents" that they so quickly switched loyalties.

The big question is whether the CNMI will really look all that different after another five years of the fund mis-appropriations, mis-management, ineptness, bribery, exploitation, bias - even ignorance and inexperience - coupled with the inevitable uncontrolled growth in government employment - that have allegedly been so typical of the present administration.

What little I know of history unfortunately would not seem to provide much in the way of guidance. While the corruption in New York City, perpetrated by Tammany Hall, has ended, more or less, the corruption in Chicago under Richard Daley continues under his son. Neither informed and assertive citizenry nor zealous government investigatory agencies seem able to consistently overcome the ward-based, patronage-driven form of local government that lends itself so easily to domination by political machines.

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Jane Mack's letter to the editor in the 11/23 issue of *Marianas Variety* describing the "Spoils System" and how it hurts the CNMI described perfectly one of the CNMI's biggest problems: at any given time, the Commonwealth government makes use of, benefits from, only 1/2 of the talented, able and knowledgeable people on island. The other half sit on the sidelines, rejected, because they aligned themselves with the "wrong" political party - the one that's not in power.

As a result, every time there is a party change in the administration, there is total disruption of procedures and practices, immense loss of the "history" of office and its policies, and extended periods of time while the new administration starts from scratch to build up its own approach to administering its responsibilities and its own files and record-keeping system.

It's bad enough that government - as well as the islands as a whole - suffer from Polynesian Paralysis (that is, that it takes twice as long to do half as much). But to have to suffer, as well, from a system of political patronage that leaves half the island's skilled personnel unemployed? What a waste! What a loss! What a shame!

Unfortunately, until and unless the legislature recognizes the problem, and creates a civil service system that allows those who are capable of doing the job to continue doing so regardless of party affiliation, the CNMI is doomed to operate at only 50% efficiency as it literally shuts off half of its brain power at any given point in time.

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Short takes:

Wouldn't it be nice if there were enough money in the ARRA grants to put all of the CNMI's power lines underground? Would seem like this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance for funding what is a very expensive project, but one that in the long term would save the CNMI, and FEMA, and the Red Cross, and everyone else involved in disaster relief and telecommunications at least that much in repetitive spending.....

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Why wasn't there a bigger outcry against the apparent easy access to automatic weapons after the killings at Kannat Tabla? Why wasn't an oversight hearing called? Why has there been no talk of revisiting the gun control laws in place in the CNMI?

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Classifying the shootings as an "isolated incident" - as was done in the governor's response to the killings - doesn't sit nearly as well as columnist Jaime Vergara's observation that "it might have been more truthful" to say that this is but another incident in random multiple shootings taking place around the world - a very disturbing, unsettling phenomenon but one that the CNMI would do its utmost to try prevent from happening again.

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Kudos to Senator Maria T. "Frica" Pangelinan for her long and thoughtful "Farewell" letter which appeared in the *Variety* on Monday and in the *Saipan Tribune* on Tuesday of this week. It may be her last public communication as Senator, but it is full of advice and recommendations for both present and incoming members of both houses, who would do well to take the time to read it closely and take to heart its messages - among others, that generating good legislation is no simple matter, but takes research, discussion, outreach, cooperation.

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Kudos also to Jaime Vergara, who wrote in his "Concluding unscientific postscript 3: CNMI politics" in the 12/02 *Trib*: "The political challenge in our time is not who will lead the Commonwealth to a balanced budget"....but "who will facilitate the making of a people whose economics is one of creation and cooperation rather than exploitation and competition, its politics one of transformation and meaning rather than conquest and coercion, and its culture one of compassion and care rather than fear and suspicion. This will be mirrored in our treatment of two-thirds of our population who are represented in

our Legislature but do not get to vote, counted in our census but are alien to our citizen assemblies....How we individually and communally treat each other across the economic divide measures the health of our soul. That is the core issue of real island global politics."

Vergara is due to leave island within the week. While his writings sometimes struck me as dense and arcane, I've always found them interesting, insightful, imaginative. I would hope he continues to share them from wherever he chooses to serve next.

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The very opposite to the Zoning Board, or at least its administrator, who concluded that the public was apathetic about zoning when only one person showed up for a public hearing held earlier this week on two proposed zoning changes (see story in the 12/2 issue of the Trib). The only notice the public received about the hearings was a single notice that a hearing would be held on "amendments (rezones) to the Official Saipan Zoning Maps, sheet 23 (As Terlaje - next to NMI) and sheet 26 (along As Perdido Road) from Village Residential to Village Commercial," and two further notices within the context of notices of the meeting of the Zoning Board, where the proposed amendments were listed on the agenda under "Permits/Applications/Rezones: review and decide" as "(1) Map 23 from VR to VC: TR#2259-1,-2,-3-1, -3-R1, -4; 21712NEW-R1, -1 (As Terlaje)" and "(2)Map 26, from VR to VC: lot #045 I 03; 022 K 02, 04, 05, 06: part of public land57-3." All notices appeared in the *Tribune*, but not the *Variety*.

Though information was provided on how to obtain further details (go to the zoning office in DanDan), there was no related press release, no further data on exactly where, what or who was involved, why the change was being requested or who was requesting it. No wonder no one responded! Public participation is not something one can take for granted; here it must be solicited and encouraged. The Zoning Board's effort to inform the public about the proposed zoning changes was totally and pathetically inadequate, and it is to be devoutly hoped that the Board will not make a decision based on the absence of public input on these proposals. Only after the public has been given adequate information and another chance to respond should a decision be made.

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Federalization is here - at least in part. With so much new information to try learn, understand, absorb, and so much still confusing and unknown, all I can say at this point is that while I pity those who must deal with and make sense of it right away, thank goodness I don't have to - at least not yet.

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Though my life span has been miraculously extended, the momentum to get my life in order has not abated; that columns may henceforth not appear regularly should not be interpreted as due to failing health so much as to an ongoing effort to establish some sort of order in my accumulated papers, or, as happened this past week, the visit of family members for the holidays.....