

On My Mind

4/9/10

I'd always viewed the U.S. census as somewhat like the holy grail - to be honored and revered because of all the good things that come from it. Mandated in the U.S. Constitution, the census had as its original purpose determining the numbers on which representation in the U.S. House of Representatives, and direct taxes, should be based.

The amount of information collected by the census has increased considerably since then, as have the uses to which the numbers and the information are applied. Census data is now used to apportion all formula-based grants to the states, and as a basis for most of the social programs and services - in housing, education, labor, welfare, health, for example - provided to the states by the U.S. government. An accurate count - and accurate data - are critical, in other words, for states - and the people in those states - to get their fair share of the benefits provided by the federal government.

The census is also used as the basis of projections for future needs, to track trends over time, and to determine policy at both the state and the federal level. Because it benefits so many in so many different ways, census information may well be one of the most valuable sources of data ever compiled. In essence, the census connects the American people to their government.

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Sad to say, and protests to the contrary notwithstanding, political intervention in the census process has now compromised the CNMI's 2010 census. It's been reported that several dozen of the people who were hired and trained, given badges and materials, who had been sworn in as census workers, were then told to "stand down," and to turn in their badges and materials, for various suspect reasons: their photo didn't turn out, their paperwork was flawed, the order came from "higher up."

Some of these people have since been called back in and given back their badges. Others, however, have not - at least not as of this writing.

It is hard to imagine that inefficiency on the part of the CNMI Department of Commerce, under whose auspices the census is being conducted, is causing this "on-again, off-again" change of status among census workers - though there have been numerous complaints about the "disorganization" of the whole effort.

In fact, rumor had it, at one point, that the governor was going to declare one of his infamous "emergencies" and waive the requirements for census workers, so he could hire more Covenant party members instead.

All of which has drawn attention to the fact that the likelihood of maintaining confidentiality of the information being collected in this long-form census, with its detailed personal and financial questions - and with the forms being collected in person by local people coming house to house, rather than by mailing them in - is rather small.

Particularly when one considers that the collection process, so I've been told, goes as follows: the Enumerator picks up the form and turns it in to his/her Assistant Crew

Leader, who turns it in to his/her Crew Leader, who turns it in to one of the Field Supervisors, who turns it in to a Supervisor at the Data Input Station, who turns it over to a Data Input Clerk, after which a Security Person is supposed to box up all the forms for shipment off island. Along the way the forms are inspected for legibility, completeness, etc. Who else may opt to look at the forms is anyone's guess.

Even without the taint that has now touched the census process, whoever was responsible for the original decision to have the data input on Saipan, instead of off-island, wasn't too knowledgeable about small island societies. It is totally unrealistic to expect that with so many people involved in the data-gathering process, all of the information that is gathered will remain absolutely confidential, never to be shared with anyone, by anyone, at any time. Small societies, where so many know so many others, don't work that way.

In fact, several people have expressed reluctance to turn their census forms in to any census worker for just that reason.

It does make sense to have census workers go house to house to make sure that a census form was received, and to make sure that one gets filled out. But the responsibility of the census worker should end there. Those being "censed" should then be provided a way to turn in their forms that will ensure they go directly to the federal government - either by mail, or through a drop-off at one of the federal offices on island. Only then can the people of the CNMI be sure their information has been kept confidential.

A complete and accurate census report is essential. This long form census is particularly important to the people of the CNMI to make sure they get the full amount due under the many formula grants that apply here. But the census may not be successful, may turn out to be not all that accurate, if procedures are not changed.

One may well ask why this issue has not been reported in the newspapers. The silence, as they say, has been deafening! It is, I would suggest, indicative of the extent to which the long arm of political influence reaches.

Recent silence of another sort has been due not so much to politics as to more pragmatic circumstances: KRNM was unexpectedly off the air for nearly a full week because of problems of timing, technicalities and logistics. During that week, KRNM, Saipan's only National Public Radio station, was moved from its former base at Northern Marianas College to a building on Mt. Topachau, and is now back on the air at 89.1 FM with a much cleaner, stronger, signal than before. As a result, KRNM's NPR programs will no longer need to be broadcast over 88.1 FM, which Marianas Educational Media Services, Inc, new holder of KRNM's FCC license, plans to develop in areas of community service. Darryl Taggerty, MEMS' managing director, promises more details in a

press release within the next week or so.

Though initial attendance was sort of sparse, by the time Non-voting Delegate to Congress Kili Sablan's open forum ended on Wednesday night of this past week, the room was full. Kili focused on education and health insurance - the former because he believes that education is the key to economic recovery and sustainability for the CNMI, the latter because of controversy surrounding its recent passage in Washington.

He said he was deeply concerned about administration plans to cut the Public School System's budget because it would jeopardize millions of dollars in federal education funding, explaining that only if PSS funding remains at 26.73% of the total government budget will the CNMI receive those funds. This was confirmed, he said, by U.S. Department of Education officials during a teleconference last week with members of the CNMI Senate and various PSS officials.

He described an ingenious "initiative" he is working on with the Office of Legislative Counsel in the U.S. House of Representatives that would apply the provisions of the National Health Service Corps, which brings doctors to underserved areas, to bringing teachers to underserved areas. Working with the NHSC, doctors can obtain scholarships to finish their training, or once trained, have some of their loans forgiven if they serve in the NHSC. Kili is proposing a similar program for educators - that would apply not just to the CNMI, but nationwide.

Among the many benefits that the recently passed health insurance legislation would provide the CNMI - which initially was not included in the bill - is a waiver of the requirement that everyone must buy health insurance (which some have objected to as being unconstitutional). Medicaid funding will also be increased.

Overall, Kili's performance was most impressive - speaking with few notes and, in some cases, fervent dedication, as he knowledgeably discussed a wide variety of both existing and pending programs and laws, their provisions, their associated dollar amounts, and their application to the CNMI.

Many thanks to Tony Benavente, Director of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources' Division of Parks and Grounds, for having finally scraped the Marpi path sidewalk from the Command Post all the way up to Suicide Cliff. Of course, it has unfortunately rained rather heavily since, but the level of debris is nowhere as bad as it was before. Benavente said he hopes to keep the path in better shape from here on out, though he said it would be increasingly difficult, considering the budget cuts to his department and division.

Given the fact that the Legislature is immune to all the budget cuts - real and/or proposed - and given the many community workers in legislators' offices, maybe the legislators should consider helping out, and having their workers take on some of the

division's work - at least within their own precincts. There are ball fields, basketball courts, recreational areas, tourist sites that all need grass cut, shrubs trimmed. If the legislators helped by taking care of district sites, the DPG could do a better job at all the other areas it is responsible for, from the administration area on Capitol Hill to the Marpi and Beach Road paths, road shoulders, etc., etc.

It sure would be a good way for the legislators to win some Brownie points.....

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I erred in my last column. The House Speaker does not have five years to go - he, as well as the rest of the House members - only have three. The senators and the governor have five. Mea culpa!