

On My Mind
6/04/10

In her blog, <www.saipanwriter.blogspot>, Jane Mack, Directing Attorney of the Marianas office of Micronesian Legal Services Corporation, made some important and insightful observations in her May 19th entry, under the heading "The Commitment to Citizenship." It was prompted, she wrote, by the discussions in the community, the rally, the comments on the Variety, and William H. Stewart's recent editorials in the Tribune.

She begins by quoting from one of Stewart's editorials: " '...there was probably little knowledge or appreciation [on the part of the people of the CNMI] of the extent of the full ramifications of an association with the American judicial system and the federal bureaucracy with its myriad of laws and regulatory agencies administering everything from environmental protection to occupational health and safety in the work place.' "

Believing her comments deserve wide distribution - and with her permission - I have reprinted the rest of her blog here, with only minor editorial changes.

She continues, "This is the take-off point for my thinking lately. When I first came to Saipan, I remember one Chamorro woman saying to me that now that she had electricity and a refrigerator, the Americans could leave. Her point of view at that time was that America was only supposed to be in the CNMI to provide support, but not for any other purpose. America was the great big free store, where you could go for what you wanted, and then leave when you got it. The NMI's relationship with the US has been colored by this type of perception.

"Americans for the most part understand that citizenship is both a benefit and a commitment. In the states, there are populist movements against the federal government because it is huge and monolithic and reaches into private lives. These movements, however, are usually fringe efforts - like the unabomber and the cult movement of the extreme fundamentalist latter day saints. The current challenge by Arizona to the US on the immigration issue is also a bit of a fringe movement - although it is an entire state government, it is only one state of 50.... Most American communities, states, large businesses, and a vast array of citizens have spoken against the Arizona laws. The commitment to the US Constitution and to the core American value of equality is part of the bedrock of America - at times very imperfectly practiced, but still the goal.

"The NMI population chose to become US citizens, too. Our local population has had no problem with some of the commitments of this citizenship. For example, CNMI young men register for the military and join voluntarily in great numbers proportionate to the population.

"But our local population has not always embraced American values. It is confusing to understand these values, because the NMI negotiated for some important exceptions. We have an exception to American constitutional protections for trial by jury....We have an exception regarding ownership of land....We have an exception to the fundamental "one man, one vote" rule.....

"If these exceptions can exist within the American system, is it any wonder our

local population does not embrace other values, values they would want an exception for as well? The most significant of these is equality. The local population wants to be top dog in the CNMI. They want to hold on to their hegemony ["leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others," according to the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd edition,]. This is "their" place and as indigenes, they want not only "local government" but local government that secures to them the goods and benefits they want, yet denies to other people in the community those same things.

"They want to have a foreign workforce legally present for decades; a labor force that can be paid extremely low wages; and one that can be permanently excluded from all political rights.

"The CNMI Governor wants to have complete control over who is prosecuted, who is let out of jail, who is searched, who is free from search. He does not want federal law enforcement DEA to act on an indictment of a local police officer; he doesn't want federal officials to search incoming passengers; he wants to be told ahead of time when federal officials will arrest his driver. And it isn't only this governor. Before him, for example, our local governors didn't want the US auditing expenditures and taxes.

"And what is misunderstood is how these actions, these goals violate American values. When the CNMI opted for the Covenant, it opted not only for the benefits of association with the US but for the commitments to citizenship as well. And this is the rub. There is tension between the local way of thinking and of doing things and the American values embedded in our Constitution.

"When our local population reached out to grab the brass ring of American citizenship, it may not have realized that it was only available with the entire package of commitments. The continuing undercurrent of discontent and malicious (and usually false) accusations against the US government all comes back to that first decision. By choosing US citizenship, by choosing to have the US be sovereign (as is specifically stated in the Covenant), by accepting the application of much of the US Constitution and the process for legislation by US Congress over the CNMI, the local population here set its course. And now it is beginning to see that the course is not entirely or even mostly within its control. The CNMI is on board the US ship; it may be able to arrange its room however it wants, but the ship is going in the direction that the US decides.

"I feel for those in the local community who find this scary and alarming. They don't want equality. They didn't realize what equality would mean. They didn't realize when they voted in the plebiscite that equality would mean that the possibility existed of other "non-locals" out-voting them in their elections. They weren't prepared for the change. And now they don't accept the change.

"They want to protect and favor their own population. They weren't prepared for the US to enforce laws against high-ranking locals; they rankle at the US enforcing its laws at all.

"They think of what they have negotiated away - some of their island land; all of the submerged lands; control over so much. And they take the benefits for granted, an entitlement now. So all they can do is keep asking for more at the same time that they

complain about the federal government stepping on their rights.

"There is a lesson in this for the foreign workers as well.

"When I went to the rally in support of long-term status for the foreign workers here, I was disgusted with some of the things that happened. No one in the massive crowd sang the US national anthem except for the few US citizens. None of the wannabes bothered, perhaps didn't know the words, and didn't particularly show respect.

"These foreign workers want to be granted status and some want to stay in the CNMI. Yet the CNMI national anthem performance was a sorry thing. Moreover, I found it extremely offensive that the organizers did not provide the right music to the students who sang the CNMI national anthem (the version they provided had changing tempos and the students didn't know what to do); the organizers didn't know how or when to stop the music (and cut it off in mid point); and then the emcee was so ignorant he didn't realize that the Carolinian verse had already been sung (he said something like and now we'll have the Carolinian anthem). In fact the emcee was so ignorant he didn't realize that there is no "Carolinian anthem"--there is only one CNMI national anthem and it has verses in both Chamorro and Carolinian.

"If our foreign workers want to be US citizens, they, too must come to realize that this is a commitment and not just a benefit. The foreign workers should start a dialogue with our local population so they don't also make the same mistakes and later regret it.

"Because becoming a US citizen requires that you stop being a citizen of another place. You can practice your religion freely. You can speak your language, but you should also learn to speak English properly. You can eat your ethnic foods and wear your ethnic clothes. You can even hold to some of your ethnic beliefs and pride. But you will be expected to adopt and practice some core American values.

"For our foreign workers, you need to know that sexism will have to end. The male prerogative is allowed in the home, but not the workplace. Free-wheeling enterprise is restricted by a myriad of laws - from business licensing to tax filing to employment laws, etc. There are rules and laws about almost everything.

"And you must also understand that your children will be more American than you are, and in a few generations they will hardly (if at all) identify with your country of origin and ethnicity."

Food for thought indeed!!!!

My apologies for last week's lapse. I was fighting a cold, and still am, for that matter. At my age, and in my condition, I find the battle more strenuous than it used to be!