

On My Mind
7/02/10

How does one bring about change? Father Fran Hezel, who has taught, written about and lived in Micronesia since 1969, proposes a rather radical cure for doing so: use outsiders in positions of authority. In the latest issue of *Micronesian Counselor*, Hezel discusses the poor condition of Chuuk's schools: many in poor shape physically, many teachers untrained and/or absent, many textbooks old and/or non-existent. There have been any number of consultants hired, assessments made, evaluations conducted, plans of action developed - all to no avail.

The problem, according to Hezel, lies in the outlook, the attitude, of everyone involved, from parent, teacher and principal to school administrator and legislator: the way to get along is to go along. In other words, don't make waves. Also, "there is enormous pressure to wait out any troublesome situation patiently and see what happens," Hezel writes.

No one wants to step forward. No one wants to confront people they know and tell them their work is unsatisfactory, their product unacceptable, their construction flawed.. No one wants to fire the delinquent teachers, file charges against the delinquent supplier, cancel the contract of the delinquent contractor.

If change and improvement are to occur, there must be what Hezel refers to as structural change; there must be a way of insulating those who do the hiring, who sign purchase orders, who authorize contractual work, from the demands of their families, relatives, friends. Hezel suggests that outsiders be used as the necessary insulator. "An ex-patriate can perform multiple functions at the same time: buffering the local administrator, educating him on what needs to be done to improve the system, and coaching him on how to get around the political pitfalls that this will often entail. This 'foreign devil' figure needs to be someone immune from the social and political pressures that might be exerted on a local decision-maker," writes Hezel.

Though his article is titled, "Make me be good: education reform for the islands," Hezel uses several examples outside of education, outside of Chuuk, to make his point. There is, in short, evidence of problems elsewhere in Micronesia and in sectors other than education where a similar approach might work. The full text is available at < www.micsem.org >.

It could be argued that the same outlook, attitude explain why people don't get upset at the waste and misspending in government: people are willing to go along to get along, willing to just wait and see what happens (not to mention that it might be family members, relatives or friends who are guilty of some of the misuse of funds).

But there's another factor in play as well. There doesn't seem to be any sense here that the money being misspent is their money. When one pays taxes, one usually gets upset if government throws that money away on self-serving activities - there is a propri-

etary interest in where that money goes, how it is spent. In the CNMI, however, not all that many people pay income taxes, and at that, they get a lot of it back in rebates. There is no sales tax. There is no property tax. There is no school tax. So people have a sense that it's not their money that is being thrown away.

Of course, there are beverage container taxes, gross receipt taxes, excise taxes, wage and salary taxes, liquid fuel taxes, to mention only a few. But these taxes are buried in the price of purchases, they are not separately shown. As a result, people don't realize that they are paying taxes to the government, nor is there any indication of how much of any item's price is actually a tax.

But in this case, the answer would seem to lie in a different kind of structural change than the one recommended by Father Hezel. The simplest would be to impose a sales tax. It wouldn't take people long to start complaining about how **their** money was being used, or misused. A more complicated change would be to have sales slips show the kind and amount of tax included in the price of whatever was purchased.

It may all be a matter of semantics, of perception. But until the ordinary person can see that it is his/her money that is going to paving people's driveways, to buying fancy government cars, to filling job slots with unqualified people, it is naive to expect outcries of protest.

The June issue of the *Commonwealth Register* has come out. Some 114 pages long, it consists of four declarations of emergency (for Anatahan, for Sarigan - which has since expired - for the Department of Public Health, and for CUC), a notice of amendment to PSS regulations, 100 pages of Executive Orders relating to CUC, and a two-page directive having to do with the Energy Steering Committee.

The declaration of Emergency for DPH I found comic. After four "whereas" clauses, the operating declaration reads as follows: "Within fifteen days of this Declaration, the Department of Public Health shall submit a written plan to move the Commonwealth from its present 'medical emergency' status to an acceptable level of care." That's it.

The declaration of Emergency for CUC, on the other hand, is frightening. Its operating declaration says, "In order to meet this imminent threat [the incapacity of CUC to provide critical power generation service and the extreme immediate threat such condition poses to the CNMI], the Constitutional authority provided under Article III Section 10 is invoked including but not limited to authority to (1) Suspend all statutory or regulatory provisions as required; and (2) the reprogramming of funds necessary to meet this emergency." There are no qualifying words, phrases, sections. The declaration is dated 6/08/2010.

The PSS amendment allows the substitution - under narrow circumstances - of an alternate to the Praxis I and II exams as part of the minimum requirements for Basic I certification.

The last item, a Directive regarding the Energy Steering Committee, is dishearten-

ing. It orders all departments, divisions, offices, government corporations, boards and commissions of the CNMI government to [each] appoint a representative to participate in meetings and activities of the Energy Steering Committee. I can't imagine anything more cumbersome!

Short takes:

In an effort to keep things legal and constitutional, the administration and the legislature are carefully tip-toeing around, trying to find just the right words - like "loan" vs. "interest" - for describing how Marianas Public Land Trust funds will be used to meet the CNMI's on-going cash-flow crisis.

But far more significant than whether it be called a loan or an advance interest payment is the fact that - at least so far as I understand it - the money that will be "loaned" or "paid" will be taken from MPLT investments, from its principal. But by reducing its principle by \$4 million, it is reducing the interest it can be expected to receive in subsequent years. Question is, how will it ever get its money back?

*

From the CNMI Humanities Council comes word that it will be launching a weekly half-hour radio program this Sunday, to be called "Your Humanities Half-Hour." The show, to be hosted by Catherine Anderson, will air each Sunday at 2:00 p.m. on Power 99 and will present a variety of humanities-based programming.

*

Trivia question of the week: What does "benign" (according to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed.) "of a kind and gentle disposition") plus "o" equal?

*

New discovery on my part: the Retirement Fund has been issuing a newsletter for 11 years! It is available in hard copy from the RF office on Capitol Hill, as well as on the website < <http://www.nmiretirement.com/> >.

*

Our distinguished House member Stanley T. Torres reminds me of the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland* who keeps saying "Off with their heads!" Torres doesn't like what the zoning board is doing, so he wants it shelved. Now he's objecting to a report made by a Marianas Visitors Authority member that Japanese tourists don't like the idea of a casino on Saipan, and wants the MVA member removed. The story was in today's *Marianas Variety*.