

On My Mind
9/10/10

If ever anyone doubted the value of having a bicameral legislature, the Senate's action on the FY 2011 budget bill this week should put that doubt to rest. At a time when one despairs at the slavish mindset of the House majority, the moderation of the Senate's approach comes as welcome reassurance. According to the account in the 6/7 *Saipan Tribune*, the Senate has restored reasonableness to the process: in the hours to be cut from the workweek, in the budgets for major government agencies, and in the revenue bill, in the amount by which license fees and other charges would be increased in the coming year.

The Senate also erased, from the budget bill, the requirement that an "exit poll" be conducted asking voters to indicate whether they agreed with the Department of Interior study on the future status of foreign workers in the CNMI.

What is it that makes the difference, that caused the Senate to act so much more rationally? Could it be that it has only one Covenant member, while the House has seven - and enough others aligned to give it a majority status? Or is it that the Senate also has more seasoned legislators than the House, where more than half the members are first-timers?

The path towards final resolution of the budget before 1 October looks rocky indeed - with House members already voicing disagreement with the Senate revision. There needs to be a clock, a vigil, a count-down established somewhere, to keep up and make visible the pressure on the House to stop its grandstanding, to stop its pandering to the administration, to be more realistic, and accept the Senate changes.

Thankfully, our more sane Senate also killed the casino bill. But according to a story in the 9/9 *Marianas Variety*, the House Speaker, who did say he'd let the casino bill drop - at least for now - has instead turned it into a bargaining chip, holding earned income tax credits as hostage.

Of course, one could ask both Houses to be more brave, and start cutting the work force itself - the only real solution to the budget crisis - but there appears little chance that that will occur.

Though a unicameral legislature has often been said to be enough for the needs of the CNMI, in this week's events, it would have been a disaster. Biba the CNMI's bicameral legislature!

It's just as well the "exit poll" has been dropped. Let's hope it stays there, for it poses a real dilemma. If one ignores the poll altogether, much could be made of the number of those who voted for it. But for those who find the options provided too narrow, voting in support of the recommendations would be misleading. The poll, as framed by the House, leaves no option for voting, "yes, I support the concept, but not these particulars."

The Commonwealth Port Authority's mindset may not be slavish, but it sure seems short-sighted, unfriendly, mean. The Tinian Dynasty has asked the Commonwealth Ports Authority to forgive its debt to the CPA, saying a clear record is needed in order to obtain funding to re-start its ferry operation between Tinian and Saipan. According to a report in the 9/8 *Trib*, the CPA has refused - though it did say it was willing to renegotiate the terms of repayment.

Particularly in light of today's poor economy, one would think that potential revenue sources would be encouraged and supported, not shot down. The Dynasty - a casino operation like the one that is supposed to bring all sorts of revenue to Saipan - has not yet lived up to its promise, though that may be due, in part, to the CNMI's failure to build its promised expanded airport landing strip.

The CPA should forgive the Dynasty its debt, work with the Tinian Dynasty to restore the ferry service, and work with the MVA to provide the Dynasty with more customers.

Not everyone will get a paycheck today, in part because more than \$1million was used to pay for scholarships. It's the "non-essential" employees who won't get their paycheck on time, according to a story in the 9/8 *Trib*. One is tempted to ask who is the more deserving. The coconut wireless overflows with stories of scholarship check recipients who squander their money - go out and buy used cars (is this what fueled the recent increase in used car sales?), go on shopping sprees, cut back on their classes or drop out altogether, and never re-pay their loans. On the other hand, why are "non-essential" employees even on the payroll?

Which is not to say that scholarships should be eliminated - countless students have used them as they were intended, to their benefit and that of the CNMI as well. But it is an area that needs more transparency, more accountability, more stringent controls. How many failures are there? Who monitors the various programs? Where are the results posted? Scholarships are not a right. They should be earned, deserved. Seems an odd dilemma: to hold up salaries of "non-essential" workers for the sake of some irresponsible students.

Short takes:

A new agricultural support service made possible by funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture will be holding a workshop on sustainable grazing and livestock management practices at NMC from 9/23-9/25. Admission is free. For details, visit < www.marianasgrazingacademy.org >, or call Carl Bier at 234-3691 on Saipan, Lawrence Duponcheel at 433-0639 or Dr. Allan Sabaldica at 433-2576 on Tinian.

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Factoid of the week: Between 12/31/09 and 6/31/10, membership in the Retirement Fund's Defined Contribution Plan - mandatory for all new government hirees - grew from 1658 to 2121 - an increase of 573. The number includes members who quit and then were re-hired.

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Kudos to historian and profligate writer Bill Stewart for his fascinating article on the Japanese surrender in the *Trib's* 9/2 issue.

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Kudos as well to Winnie Atalig, who challenged the legislature and the island's educational institutions, in a letter to the editor in the 9/8 *Trib*, to focus on "providing the type of education the community really needs." She urges more evaluation and certification of all trainers, more courses that meet local labor market needs (including government employment), and more credit for in-house training courses, among other things.

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Kudos also to the letter-to-the-editor writer, who noted in the *Trib's* 9/7 issue that the legislature is helpless to do anything about preventing the governor from giving jobs to relatives and political supporters because "It would be political suicide for the Legislature to go against the sitting governor." There is no way out of it except by "outside intervention," the letter said. It urges readers to support the "outside intervention" of the federal government that would give CNMI contract workers citizenship. because, by doing so, the CNMI legislature would become more diverse and corruption would be minimized.

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Last but not least, kudos as well to the Northern Mariana Protection and Advocacy Systems, Inc. for coming out of its last audit with not a single mark against it. Seems, of late, that anywhere one looks, anything one touches, has problems, is flawed in one way or another. On the other hand, NMPASI, a non-profit organization, came out of its latest federal audit by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' office of the Regional Inspector General for Audit Services without a single finding identified for formal resolution, according to stories published in both papers late last week. NMPASI's audit was performed by Scott Maglieri and Company.