

On My Mind
10/29/10

There's a fascinating story in the October issue of *Vanity Fair*, about how pervasive corruption, bribery, tax evasion, are in the Greek economy. "It's simply assumed, for instance, that anyone who is working for the government is meant to be bribed," Michael Lewis, author of "Beware of Greeks Bearing Bonds," writes.

"...the only Greeks who paid their taxes were the ones who could not avoid doing so - the salaried employees of corporations, who had their taxes withheld from their paychecks.....people never learned to pay their taxes. And they never did because no one is punished. No one has ever been punished," a Greek tax collector tells Lewis.

He continues, "One reason no one is ever prosecuted - apart from the fact that prosecution would seem arbitrary...is that the Greek courts take up to 15 years to resolve tax cases. "The one who does not want to pay, and who gets caught, just goes to court."

Lewis also notes that "The Greek public-school system is the site of breathtaking inefficiency: one of the lowest-ranked systems in Europe, it nonetheless employs four times as many teachers per pupil as the highest-ranked, Finland's. Greeks who send their children to public schools simply assume that they will need to hire private tutors to make sure they actually learn something."

During years of easy credit, the government became a pinata stuffed with fantastic sums, and people given as many whacks at it as possible, resulting, among other things, in the average government job paying almost three times that of the average private sector job.

So pervasive are the problems that no one trusts anyone. "The hardest thing to do in Greece is to get one Greek to compliment another behind his back. No success of any kind is regarded without suspicion. Everyone is pretty sure everyone is cheating on his taxes, or bribing politicians, or taking bribes....And this total absence of faith in one another is self-reinforcing. The epidemic of lying and cheating and stealing makes any sort of civic life impossible; the collapse of civic life only encourages more lying, cheating, and stealing. Lacking faith in one another, they fall back on themselves and their families."

The full article appears at <
<http://www.vanityfair.com/business/features/2010/10/greeks-bearing-bonds-201010> >

It's nice to know some places are worse than the CNMI.....

Who(m) to vote for in the election? Voting for Republican candidate Juan N. Babauta because the Republicans will probably be a majority in the U.S. Congress after the elections may sound like a good idea, but it could backfire. Not all issues supported by the Republican Party are helpful to the CNMI. But party members are expected to vote the party line, and those that don't do so soon lose the support of their party.

On the other hand, voting for Democratic Party candidate Jesse C. Borja may sound like a good idea, because that is the party of the President. But that too, could backfire, for the same reason - not all Democratic issues are helpful to the CNMI, and party members who don't support the party line soon lose the support of their party.

Voting for Covenant Party candidate Joseph N. Camacho on the theory that he will be able to work with either Democrats or Republicans may sound good, but the disadvantage is that he has no party to back his causes. That would happen only if he changed parties - which is not so uncommon in the CNMI, as this candidate well knows - but doing so would be tricky, because it would dis-align him from the local party.

Voting for Independent candidate Gregorio Kilili Sablan - who has been Independent from the very beginning - is the only vote that makes sense. Kilili has already established ties and connections with both parties in Congress, has already proved he can work easily and comfortably with members on both side of the aisle for legislation that benefits the CNMI, and has already won backing and support from both Republicans and Democrats in the Congress.

This may be a tight election, and even one vote could make a difference, so it's important that every eligible voter votes on election day. It's even more important that voters make good choices, and vote according to their own beliefs and standards, not someone else's. It's not clear how early voting ballots are being treated, but regular ballots are guaranteed to be private - no one can track who individuals vote for except the voter him/herself.

The key word in this election - as it should be in every election - is "integrity." Integrity, according to the *American Heritage College Dictionary*, 4th ed., is defined as "Steadfast adherence to a strict ethical code." I can't think of a better example than Kilili. He practices integrity in his private as well as public life, and has done so long before he went to Washington. Not once in the ten years he served as Executive Director of the Commonwealth Election Commission have the anomalies, the carelessness, the failure of the public education program come up that have plagued the current Election Commission head.

Short takes:

Short notice, but...The Japanese Society invites the general public to join its clean-up drive of monuments at the Last Command Post in Marpi tomorrow, Saturday, 10/30 starting at 9:00 a.m. For more information, call Yoichi Matsumura at 322-8785 or 287-8785.

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Those voters who opted to vote early - more than 1,000 - better be sure they are not visible on November 2, Election Day. After all, they swore, on an affidavit, that they would be unable to vote any time between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday because they'd either be on travel, conducting business, serving in the U.S. military, undergoing medical treatment, representing government or helping a family member with one of the above.

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One wonders why the polling place for Tanapag was moved from the conveniently accessible Youth Center, where it has been the last few times, back to the Tanapag school cafeteria, where it had been previously, and where parking and access are more difficult. Let's hope the accessibility survey form - being distributed by the Commonwealth Election Commission, the CNMI Council on Developmental Disabilities and NMC's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities - will be available to voters there.

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Next week has only two functioning work days for government: Monday, which is a holy day of obligation, but not a holiday, and Wednesday. Tuesday, election day, has been declared a holiday, Thursday is Citizenship day, another holiday, and Friday is the first of the alternate Friday government shut-downs.

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Kudos to Herminia Fusco, Chair of the Zoning Board, for her thorough and well-reasoned defense of the zoning code at the House hearing last week on Stanley Torres' House Local Bill 17-26, Torres' lengthy rejoinder notwithstanding. According to the story in the *Marianas Variety*, Fusco said the bill would allow for illegal spot zoning, and create serious problems of interpretation.

Kudos as well to Craig Harrison, Marianas High School principal, for coming up with a creative way to involve parents in helping the school. He has asked school families to donate bags of cement - that will be visibly piled up at the school - for use in improving sidewalks, parking lots and other paved areas at the school.

Two events next week at the American Memorial Part theater: Thursday, 11/4, from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. - a free workshop for interested teachers, writers, parents, and others on 'making science digestible for the public;' on Friday, 11/5 at 6:30 p.m., First

Friday film "Blue Gold, World Water Wars," which deals with the role of large corporations and private investors in controlling supply and demand of drinking water throughout the world.

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On a personal note: For sale: A Devilbliss oxygen concentrator, used only 100 hours. If interested, send an e-mail to <ruth.tighe@pticom.com>.