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W C. Bura

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Micronesia: unification and the
coming of self-government

C. Heine

Although Micronesia (Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands) is small in population and land mass, it stands out from many Pacific Islands in many ways. Its geographical and strategic importance have long drawn the islands into colonial, economic, diplomatic, and political conflicts of powers from the outside world.

It would be an understatement to suggest that Micronesia is very difficult to govern. The present population is estimated at about 91,000 - yet it has been endowed with more problems than have most island groups in the Pacific many times its size. Prominent among these problems is a marked lack of political integration.

Not long ago, a former high official of the Trust Territory Government made the remark that 'Micronesia was perhaps the most unlikely candidate for self-government or independence which has appeared in modern times (Hawkins 1969:1). This statement is indisputable. For although Micronesia is on the threshold of defining and deciding its future political status, the hard facts of geography and economics pose a real problem with which Micronesian leaders must reckon.

This dilemma is further entangled in that as one astute observer pointed out, 'the islands of Micronesia minus Guam and the Gilberts comprise perhaps the most artificial polity of all dependent territories (Hawkins 1969:1). These hard facts of geography and economics are major barriers that stand in the way of finding a viable political status, but perhaps a more difficult problem, it seems to me, is the question of unification: how to unify six major groups of peoples who distrust one another.

To understand this problem it will be necessary to look into the background of political development in Micronesia to see how the people of Micronesia were moulded into what they are today.

Development of Western political institutions

Western concepts of political process and the development of political institutions originated in Micronesia under United States military government when President Truman, in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Armed Forces, assumed administrative responsibility for the area. He delegated the administrative responsibility to the Secretary of the Navy on an interim basis, who further delegated such authority to Admiral Nimitz, who as Commander-in-Chief of the United States Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas, Military Governor of the Pacific Area, issued during and soon after the conclusion of hostilities, the first proclamation to the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands informing them of the purpose, nature and structure of American military government.

Proclamation One, issued on 4 February 1944, to the Marshallese people illustrates this position:

All powers of government and jurisdiction in the occupied territory and over the inhabitants therein, and final administrative responsibility are vested in me as Admiral, United States Navy, commanding the United States forces of occupation and Military Governor, and will be exercised through subordinate commanders by my direction.

There were similar proclamations issued to the other districts by subordinate commands as the American forces moved further west and south; but Proclamation Number One issued in 1944 signified the very first attempt under American military government to establish Western concepts of government in Micronesia (Jones 1954:146).

Though this proclamation was strictly military and dictatorial in nature and character, the people accepted it as replacement for the Japanese military regime which was much worse by comparison.

After the unconditional surrender of Japan on 2 September 1945, American naval military government spread throughout the mandated area. On 12 December 1945, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance, Commander-in-Chief, United States Pacific Fleet and Military Governor of the Pacific Area, issued a directive setting forth basic rules for the conduct and government of the people of the occupied territory. This has often been referred to as the 'Pacific Charter' (Mason 1948:106). The directive provided, among other things, for the following:

- (a) The early establishment of self-governing communities;
- (b) the institution of a sound programme of economic development (Jones 1954:149),

and furthermore, the directive stated:

It is desired that the inhabitants of the occupied territories be granted the highest degree of self-government that they are capable of assimilating. They should be encouraged and assisted to assume as much as possible of the management of their own affairs and the conduct of their own government (Jones 1954:149).

This so-called Pacific Charter laid the first foundation upon which civil administrations were to function, and gave the Micronesians their first taste of participation in government in a new way of life.

This later directive did not establish a new form of government; it only modified the major policies and in minor detail the administrative structure of naval military government. The directive did reflect, however, a change of emphasis from authoritarian military government to civil administration. But the islands were still governed according to the needs and purposes of the United States, rather than according to the needs of the indigenous population. The law of the jungle prevailed: 'might makes right'.

Civilian administration

As early as 1946, it became the announced policy of the United States that at a suitable time the Micronesian Islands would be placed under civilian jurisdiction. The Navy and the Department of the Interior reached general agreement concerning the transfer of administrative responsibility,¹ and on 1 July 1951, the transfer from Navy to the Department of the Interior was completed.

The President, as under naval administration, had complete

¹Executive Order 10265, 29 June 1951, was superseded by Executive Order 11021 by President J.F. Kennedy in 1962. Executive Order 10265 spelt out the responsibilities of the Civil Administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

authority over the Micronesian Islands. He has vested general authority in the Secretary of the Interior, who has in turn delegated administrative responsibility to the High Commissioner. Up to 12 July 1965, the High Commissioner made, as well as executed, the laws of the Trust Territory. Indeed, he had almost unlimited power and authority.

The pattern and extent of field or district administration has not changed to any considerable degree since 1947. The islands of Micronesia are divided for administrative purposes into six districts: Palau and Yap in the Western Carolines, Truk and Ponape in Eastern Carolines, the Marshalls, and the Northern Marianas. Each district is headed by an administrator, known under the Navy's administration as Civil Administrator and presently called District Administrator, who is appointed by and responsible to the High Commissioner.

The kingpins of the government of Trust Territory are the District Administrators. They exercise, because of the peculiar administrative situation of the islands, far greater control and responsibility, than would normally be vested in such positions. The District Administrators are in a position to know, learn and control all aspects of the administration. They are also in a position to exercise dictatorial powers. Success of the Trust Territory administration depends entirely upon the attitude of the District Administrators. Ideally, their training, experience and personality should be such that they are scholars, practical administrators and diplomats. They should know in considerable detail native customs, cultures and problems. Daily administrative tasks necessitate a knowledge of accounting, office management and principles of organisation. Above all, they must be master diplomats and shrewd judges of human behaviour in order to cope with problems posed by the isolated Micronesian communities and a sometimes openly hostile people.

Development of legislative bodies

When the United States made its report to the United Nations Trusteeship Council during the summer of 1949 in conformity with the Terms of the Trusteeship Agreement, it briefly outlined its plan for the political advancement of the Trust Territory. According to that plan, attention would be focussed initially on the development of self-governing municipalities or local government units, then progressively the powers of district bodies would be increased, and finally territory-wide organs of self-government

would be developed in which the indigenous population would play a substantial, if not a major part (Trust Territory Administration 1968).

Let us examine the development of local government units and see whether the reality of the development of local government authority and responsibility has been in accordance with this plan.

As noted earlier, the development of local municipalities, as well as local participation of the indigenous people, was encouraged by the naval administration, but it was not until April 1957 that the administration actually took steps to begin chartering municipalities throughout the districts in Micronesia. The main objectives of the chartering of municipalities were 'to delineate municipal boundaries, define authority, specify taxing and legislative powers, set up procedures for the election of municipal officers, and outline their duties' (Meller 1969:271). This programme continued in every district throughout Micronesia. Today there are more than forty-six chartered municipalities encompassing the remote villages of Micronesia.

In reality, the establishment of local municipalities has been more a government sanction of the remnants of the traditional systems, rather than the establishment of the Western system of local government. For example, the magistrates have almost always been the hereditary chiefs and the fact that the government stages election of these officials is a misleading one. The traditional system is fading away, and the actual power of the magistrates has gradually faded with it.

The District Legislatures of the six regional districts came into existence at different times after World War II. The Palauan Congress (now Palau District Legislature) has the distinction of having been the first legislative advisory body to have been established under the authority of the United States military government, prior to the approval of the Trusteeship Agreement.¹ The Marshall Islands Congress was proclaimed an advisory body to the Civil Administrator in November 1949; its final approval by the military High Commissioner came in June 1950.

The Yap Islands Congress (now Yap District Legislature)

¹Palau Congress was established on 4 July 1947, and the Trusteeship Agreement was signed on 18 July 1947.

had been in existence unofficially for a number of years prior to the time the Interior Department assumed responsibility in 1951 and was officially recognized in that year. This Congress for many years served the District of Yap without any representation from the outer islands of Yap whose people were, in effect, disenfranchised. In 1968, by an act of the Congress of Micronesia a new bill for a charter including representation from the outer islands people was introduced and signed into law, thus creating the present legislature representing, for the first time, all of Yap District.

*deprived
of some
privileges*

In the Eastern Caroline Islands, the Ponape Islands Congress came into existence after the High Commissioner approved its charter in 1952. In January 1963, the Mariana Islands District Legislature Charter was finally approved and signed into law. Prior to this time, the northern islands of the Marianas were served by the Saipan Municipal Council, which has the distinction of being the first local government unit to have been chartered pursuant to a directive issued by the United States military government on 28 May 1947. On 25 September in the same year that the Mariana Islands District Legislature was chartered, the High Commissioner granted Truk District Congress its charter.

genuine These 'district legislatures', established at various times and stages of development, came into existence not as bona fide law-making bodies, but to serve each District Administrator as advisory bodies. They were the first training ground for most of the leaders of Micronesia today. They gave a somewhat illusory sense of belonging and participation in the government of the districts in which they existed. These original six legislative bodies in turn broadened the horizons of local leaders in the development of political institutions in Micronesia.

To fulfil the Administering Authority plan for the political advancement of the Trust Territory, the final phase of a territory-wide organ of self-government was instituted when in August 1956 the first meeting of the 'Inter-District Advisory Committee to the High Commissioner' was held in the Administration headquarters in Guam. Delegates, representing all the six districts, were chosen by district congresses, councils, and other representative groups. The formation of the Inter-District Advisory Committee represented a major step in promoting territory-wide political consciousness (Trust Territory Administration 1968:8).

The Inter-District Advisory Committee existed for five

years. It served during its tenure as the only territory-wide body whose members were elected to advise the High Commissioner who, however, always reserved the position of chairman for himself. During the Committee's last conference held in 1961, the delegates made a recommendation to change the Inter-District Advisory Committee to the 'Council of Micronesia'. This proposal was approved by the High Commissioner on 15 September 1961, the former Inter-District Advisory Committee was reconstituted as the Council of Micronesia, and for the first time the delegates were able to elect a fellow Micronesian to be the first Micronesian chairman of that body.

The period from 7 to 21 November 1963 marked the historic fourth session of the Council of Micronesia (Trust Territory Administration 1968:18). Up to this time, the Council had been pushing for a territory-wide ~~bona fide~~ *genuine* legislative body, as opposed to a simply advisory body. Finally in that historic fourth session, the administering authority recognised the wishes of the Council and presented a draft proposal for the creation of such a body, which later came to be known as the Congress of Micronesia. 'Important suggestions were made by the Council of Micronesia and these suggestions were subsequently incorporated into the Secretarial Order 2882' (Trust Territory Administration 1968:18) which was issued in September 1964, creating the Congress of Micronesia. The 'formal transfer of legislative authority from the High Commissioner to the newly established Congress of Micronesia did not occur until 12 July 1965, when the Congress first convened' (Trust Territory Administration 1968:20).

While these successive developments taken by the Administering Authority indicate a certain amount of flexibility in implementing its plan for the political advancement of the Trust Territory, the development of political institutions and political awareness among the inhabitants of Micronesia does appear to have followed, in form, if not always in substance, along the line of the Administering Authority's plan of approach as outlined before the United Nations Trusteeship Council in 1949. However, as Professor J.W. Davidson has pointed out, 'The principle of separation of powers is applied in an exaggerated form when the executive branch is headed by a High Commissioner responsible, through the Secretary of the Interior, to the President of the United States, and in no way answerable to the people of

Micronesia', (Davidson 1969:2).¹

It can be argued, though, that actual legislative authority did not come into being until the formation of the Congress of Micronesia. This legislative authority began at the top with the Congress of Micronesia and the local legislatures and councils continued to exist more as advisory bodies than as true legislative bodies.

The quest for a future

The creation of the Congress of Micronesia marked a significant turning point in the political history of the islands of Micronesia. The issuance of Secretarial Order 2882 signified a transfer of the first real legislative power in a relationship that had been for many years one-sided with respect to enactment of laws and regulations that govern the Trust Territory. The Congress of Micronesia became the focal point of attention, an agency for the Micronesian people not only to voice their feelings of discontentment against the Administering Authority, but actually to enact laws.

The grant of legislative authority to the people of Micronesia suddenly presented an alternative to the Administering Authority's long and consistent goal of 'holding out self-government under the American flag as the only choice for the people of Micronesia' (Robbins 1967:16).² Now, there was the possibility of other choices, and the Micronesians themselves had a voice in these choices. There are two choices presently under consideration by the people of Micronesia as possible alternatives to the present system of government. They are: (a) a self-governing state of Micron-

¹Dr Davidson is a noted authority on political and constitutional development of the Pacific Islands. In 1969, he was retained as Consultant to the Future Political Status Commission. He is Professor of Pacific History at the Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, former Consultant to State of Western Samoa, Republic of Nauru, and the Cook Islands.

²Dr Robbins was the first Legislative Counsel for the Congress of Micronesia when it was first established in 1965. He is also noted scholar on the political development of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

esia in free association with the United States and (b) independence. According to Professor R.R. Robbins (1967:16), 'A number of people who have pondered the issue of the Trust Territory believe that we (United States) have already waited too long, and the time for obtaining favourable and enthusiastic response from the people (Micronesians) may already been passed'. There is merit in this observation, for as late as 1967 there were strong feelings in the Congress of Micronesia that the only choice for the future was to request the United States Congress to enact an 'Organic Act' for the Trust Territory, which would have made it an outright possession of the United States. But like many other previous requests, this was not received favourably by the Administering Authority. The Micronesian leaders have gone far beyond this, and no longer consider it as a serious possibility.

It was during the summer of 1967 that the search for an ultimate political status of Micronesia formally got under way. At that time, the two houses of the Congress of Micronesia adopted Senate Joint Resolution 25, which created the 'Future Political Status Commission'.

'When Congress adopted Joint Resolution 25, few Americans, if any, realised what an impact it would have on the future of the Trust Territory. Micronesia's relationship with the United States and with the United Nations, the position of American strategic and military interests, and the functioning of the Trust Territory Government itself - all have been affected by this Joint Resolution', (Heine 1969:127).

Micronesians had waited for over twenty years for the Americans to institute a more intensive policy of development. They had lost patience. During the spring of 1969, the Future Political Status Commission visited the islands and countries of the South Pacific. The purpose of the trip was to study the range of political development in such countries as Western Samoa, American Samoa, Fiji and Papua-New Guinea. The Commission came back with a clearer understanding of possibilities and was more than ever determined to finish the task before it!

In the summer of that same year, the Future Political Status Commission made the decision to visit each one of the six districts of Micronesia to ascertain the feelings and thinking of the people. It was during this visit to the districts that the Commission came out with its 'Statement of Intent'. This document states in part that

... the Political Status Commission was created to study the alternatives before Micronesia. We have not taken this task lightly nor have we accomplished our work quickly. We have consulted amongst ourselves. We have consulted scholars and administrators. We have weighed the interests of America and of our own people.

We recommend that the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands be constituted as a self-governing state and that this Micronesian state - internally self-governing and with Micronesian control of all its branches, including the executive - negotiate entry into free association with the United States. (Micronesian Future Political Status Commission 1969:1-2)

In the Third Session of the Congress of Micronesia, 1969, the Commission submitted its recommendation contained in its report to Congress of Micronesia. The report was adopted with the idea of a 'free association' as the most acceptable alternative and 'independence' as the only other alternative.

The quest for a future political status had come to rest on this recommendation that Micronesia enter into negotiation with the United States in order to create the Free-Associated State of Micronesia in free association with the United States.

Problems of unification

The Future Political Status Commission is to be applauded for the study it has made of various forms of political institutions and recommendations of political alternatives. However, it seems to me that the Status Commission left out one very important commodity: the people. When we talk about people we are talking about culture, language, feelings, attitudes and aspirations.

Today there are nine different regional languages spoken in Micronesia, but the use of the English language as the only territory-wide medium of communication has divided the people of Micronesia into two groups, the few who govern and the many who are governed, the one using the English language - the other unable to use that language. The English language is the only vehicle of political unity in Micronesia, yet the rise of nationalism in Micronesia endangers this vehicle of unity. It is a dilemma that the

only language that can unite the people of the Trust Territory is spoken by a very small proportion of the population.

Micronesian linguistic loyalties have deep roots in Micronesian history. The six dominant regional cultures are based or centred on language communities. These regional linguistic loyalties represent values more easily intelligible and acceptable to the average Micronesian than all the talk about modernisation or the future of Micronesia. Language creates a people. The Palauan language has created the Palauan people, the Yapese language has created the Yapese people, so also with the Marshallese language and the Marshallese people. There is no such thing as 'Micronesian language' to create a Micronesian national.

Feelings and attitudes are part of the same linguistic loyalties. What is considered valuable in Palau may have no value at all in Truk or vice versa. The Yapese distrust the Palauans and dislike the Saipanese. The Saipanese consider the other districts as inferior and savage people. The people residing in the district centres regard people from the neighbouring outer islands as outsiders and inferiors who migrate into the district centres to look for jobs and thus create all sorts of problems.

This general attitude is not dying, and it is greatly hindering the cause of unity in Micronesia. With respect to employment, the administration is finding it very difficult to recruit able and qualified Micronesians to top positions in the executive branch. Those Micronesians that are qualified are not willing to work under another Micronesian in a higher position. On the other hand, there are those Micronesians who would prefer an American Administrator over having a Micronesian District Administrator.

The fear of domination by another racial or linguistic group is a major problem in Micronesia. One is a Yapese first before he is a Micronesian. The same is true of the other districts. Palauans are aggressive, but if a Yapese or Trukese must imitate Palauans in order to compete as Micronesians then neither would want to be Micronesians, much less be Palauans. Micronesians withhold their loyalties on the most basic level.

Much has been made of the fact that Congress of Micronesia is a unifying force in Micronesia. This statement, while it may be true, needs to be qualified. The Congress of Micronesia tends to present, it seems, a false sense of unity. It shows a united front, only because it has a

common foe - the American Administering Authority. Once that adversary is removed, the inherent feelings of regionalism will resurface as they did in the summer of 1967 when a resolution was about to be introduced, the essence of which was to divide up the whole territory into East and West. Indeed, on the territorial level, the appearance of unity among the indigenous leaders of the Trust Territory is impressive. However, this misleading appearance of unity has been created by the ability of the leaders to adopt and use certain tools and commodities non-Micronesian in nature and character, such as the English language, ability to function in the Western culture, and appreciation of the benefits of modern conveniences, which must be supplied by a modern economy. But the feelings of regionalism are there all the time. Within the halls of the Congress of Micronesia votes are cast on the basis of district regionalism and not on the basis of the common good. Those who vote on the pure merits of the issues are the exception and almost always in the minority.

Geographically speaking, the great majority of the Micronesian people are still living in the remote villages, the islands and atolls throughout the 3,000,000 square miles of ocean that comprise the Trust Territory. Contact with these peoples is extremely difficult.

It is difficult enough for the Marshallese people to make any contact among themselves, but for an outer islander from the Marshalls to make any contact at all with people from the outer islands of Yap or Truk or Palau is, indeed, a chance of a lifetime. These outer islands people of Micronesia have a very vague conception of what life is like in the district centres, much less in the outside world of today.

To explain to them the concept of a 'Free Associated State' is like trying to explain Einstein's theory of relativity to a first grader. The Administering Authority's failure to provide an efficient system of communication, transportation, and education has helped create this condition.

It is not the intention of this paper to dwell on the past mistakes of the Administering Authority. The point of focus is directed at the Micronesians themselves. It is they who are now asking that they be given the chance to run the affairs of government and questions must be asked.

History provides some interesting analogies of the

problems of trying to unite diverse cultural groups into a single country. In Nigeria, the British organised a great number of tribal groups into a single political entity and gave them a common language, English, and a common legal system modelled on the British system. But the recent civil war and the tragedy of Biafra has demonstrated the fragile nature of Nigerian unity. The partition of India is another example. The British were blamed for leaving too early and leaving the Muslim minority at the mercy of the Hindu majority. Micronesia may be approaching a similar situation where none of the six districts of Micronesia will tolerate being dominated by another district.

By way of conclusion, it can be argued that Micronesia's contact with the West has destroyed the old life beyond recall. Western political institutions have taken root in Micronesia and will inevitably become part of life in Micronesia. However, complete Westernisation is unlikely and probably not desirable. Micronesians, even as they change, must change within the framework of their own culture. Unless the Micronesians accept one another as equal and try to overcome the narrow and selfish feelings of regionalism, the future outlook is dark. The Micronesians' right of self-determination is unquestionable; but the readiness to accept one another as equals is unassured, and the hope and expectation of autonomy is indeed questionable.

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