

2 NOV 1974
PDN

Editorial

Voter Opinion Nice....

We have no quarrel with a referendum by the people.

It probably is a good method to ascertain the true wishes of the people. But, let's face it. It really doesn't prove, or do all that much either.

The latest attempt to get a referendum on Guam came Wednesday, when a bill asking for the addition to Tuesday's ballot of five referendum issues — including two on gambling, one on district representation for senators, another on four year terms for Senators, and another on the possibility of having the Micronesian islands merge with the Territory of Guam.

Sen. Adrian Sanchez quickly withdrew his abortive bill after heavy criticism came from other sponsors. Sanchez felt that the questions should be posed to voters in this election because a special referendum would be too costly. A nice point. But why the wait until now?

Sen. Joe Ada led the opposition by saying that while the questions should be asked the voters, it really was too late to include the items on the ballot now, because the voting public wasn't prepared to decide on these issues, especially gambling. He felt an "educational" program was needed. Sen. Ada said that people must be better informed on the pros and cons of the issue.

Another Senator, Ricardo Salas, said that the Legislature should vote on the five issues. He said that a referendum would be "passing the buck" to the voters on decisions that should be made by the Legislature. Certainly, this is a point too. Ultimately, of course, the decision will have to be made by the legislature on all of the matters. However, we don't really see anything wrong in trying to get the feel or the pulse of the public by having a referendum on the matter. After all, the referendums — unlike California law — are not binding.

As a matter of fact, on the subject of referendums, we really wouldn't mind taking a closer look at the California initiative referendum law to see if it could be adopted here, although we doubt that the legislature would be much interested in giving control of the law making process back to the people.

In the immediate past eight years only two referendums have been put on the ballot. Both were disavowed because the vote went against the grain of the legislature, and thus nothing happened. The first one called for the districting (not re-districting) of the Guam legislature. Even though the people voted in favor of districting in the referendum members of the legislature decided that the people really didn't realize what they were voting for, and the districting plan was shelved.

The second referendum was equally faulty in content. It asked simply whether or not the people of Guam favored the re-unification of the Marianas (not Micronesia). There was little public debate or "education" on the subject, with the assumption being that most people on Guam favored re-unification of the islands. On the next day the people of the Northern Marianas were to vote on a similar proposal. To just about everyone's surprise, the people of Guam, in an exceedingly light turn out, rejected the idea of re-unification, or re-integration, as they called it. Then again, to everyone's further surprise, the people of the Northern Marianas voted FOR the re-integration.

It was a true slap in the face to the islanders north of Guam to think that they had been "rejected" by the people of Guam, even though they were also Chamorro in race, and in fact, spoke the same language. The only possible opposition from Guam against the merger came from some people who felt that the school system, and the whole infrastructure of the Northern Marianas would have to be upgraded to Guam's level, and thus such a unification would be exceedingly expensive for Guam.

Our point is that while such referendums are of keen interest, the

put on the ballot. Both were disavowed because the vote went against the grain of the legislature, and thus nothing happened. The first one called for the districting (not re-districting) of the Guam legislature. Even though the people voted in favor of districting in the referendum members of the legislature decided that the people really didn't realize what they were voting for, and the districting plan was shelved.

The second referendum was equally faulty in content. It asked simply whether or not the people of Guam favored the re-unification of the Marianas (not Micronesia). There was little public debate or "education" on the subject, with the assumption being that most people on Guam favored re-unification of the islands. On the next day the people of the Northern Marianas were to vote on a similar proposal. To just about everyone's surprise, the people of Guam, in an exceedingly light turn out, rejected the idea of re-unification, or re-integration, as they called it. Then again, to everyone's further surprise, the people of the Northern Marianas voted FOR the re-integration.

It was a true slap in the face to the islanders north of Guam to think that they had been "rejected" by the people of Guam, even though they were also Chamorro in race, and in fact, spoke the same language. The only possible opposition from Guam against the merger came from some people who felt that the school system, and the whole infrastructure of the Northern Marianas would have to be upgraded to Guam's level, and thus such a unification would be exceedingly expensive for Guam.

Our point is that while such referendums are of keen interest, the history of such votes by the people of Guam hasn't been one of much success. Certainly there would be no valid point in attempting to put such measures on a ballot with a bare week before an election. Voters need a chance to study the various aspects of both sides of the issue being voted upon. One week wouldn't permit such an observation to be made, and probably wouldn't have even allowed enough time to print the ballots.

Frankly, we'd like to wait for a few months after the general election, and see the issues debated more fully on the island, and on the floor of the legislature, even before any referendum format is made up.

We would like to see the voters of Guam have an opportunity to make their preference known on legalizing slot machines, and on casino-style gambling. We would like the question of the four year senatorial term put to the public. We would especially like to see the issues of the re-integration, and the districting bill brought to the voters once more, just to see if they have changed from the last time. We believe, however, that re-integration is pretty much of a dead issue, thanks to our lack of leadership in the past. The Northern Marianas are hard on the negotiating trail for a Commonwealth Status, a deal that sounds even better than what the people of Guam have today. They are not about to consider joining Guam at this stage, especially after what happened in the earlier referendum. Why should they? At the time of the earlier referendum Guam at least had something to offer the Northern Marianas—such as U.S. citizenship, Social Security, and Minimum Wage laws. Now we don't have any such goodies to dangle in front of them, because they'll get all that, and more, a guaranteed grant each year.

With the advent of sophisticated polls in some parts of the nation, the referendum, which does little more than determine (as do the polls) how people feel about a particular problem, may be going the way of the carrier pigeon. Yet, on Guam where poll taking hasn't been quite as refined it might be a logical way for the members of the legislature to determine the wishes of the people, particularly on a sensitive, or controversial issue. If the people on Guam, for instance, voted heavily in favor of casino gambling, then the legislators would probably have no qualms about passing such legislation, rationalizing that the people of the island favor it.

No, a referendum for Guam should be recognized for what it is, a sampling of the voter opinion. But it can't be done hastily, with no chance for public information and debate. Let's hold off on this type of opinion taking for a few months. JCM.