

On My Mind

4/27/01

A month or more ago, this column noted that the local Republican Party's interest in joining the national Republican Party was not a good idea - that it would polarize the CNMI's support in Washington, making it dependent on the party in power.

A long-time scholar, writer and observer of island politics, Fred Radewagon, responded at great length, pointing out that lack of political affiliation has made it difficult for the CNMI to participate in many politically-based functions in Washington, D.C., and has left it outside the political spheres of influence.

According to Radewagon, "If CNMI is ever going to be a genuine member of the American political family, and its people become genuine Americans, then it must participate in the political system." Radewagon notes, as he has on previous occasions, that most islanders still consider themselves islanders first, and Americans second, as though this were a problem. He maintains that "lack of participation in the political system only reinforces this perception." Elsewhere, he makes the depressing comment that the system [in Congress] does not provide for independents.

But conformity has never been a strong point in the island psyche - particularly when it comes to conforming to mainland expectations. There is an underlying essence of Pacific/Asiatic attitudes and beliefs that does not easily mesh with the Western/European outlook. American values do not automatically fit well nor are they automatically appropriate on these shores (nor, necessarily - given present values - anywhere else in the world). Even yet, not everyone is persuaded that the CNMI would be better off with a voting delegate in the U.S. House of Representatives, rather than a non-voting Resident Representative to Washington, D.C.

Though Radewagon wrote that the CNMI is often overlooked when it comes to such things as getting tours of the White House or picture opportunities with the President or recognition at the recent inaugural ball (which all bona fide Republican Party member-states were given), the fact of the matter is that the CNMI would appear to be doing quite well when it comes to interfacing with the many federal agencies whose programs and funding are in effect here.

Radewagon offers an ardent defense for aligning one's self with a political party, but whether that's the best step for the CNMI is a different question. The CNMI is already a maverick of sorts - even among the "territories." It might be more to its advantage to emphasize the differences than to try to conform to the rest of them.

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The fire two weeks ago at the cardboard factory raises some interesting issues. What kind of cardboard were they making? For whom? Was it ever permitted? What was it doing in the middle of a residential area? How lucky that sparks didn't ignite the near-by gas station!

With proper zoning, that factory would never have been there.....

It's also interesting to note that the injury of a single employee was enough to bring an Occupational Safety and Health Administration representative all the way from Hawaii. As was noted by a local pundit, OSHA seems to be overly sensitive nowadays - after having gotten egg on its face for the many years it ignored all sorts of labor violations in the CNMI.

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Short takes: Economic slump notwithstanding, the Flame Tree Arts Festival was a resounding success in my book. Plenty of booths, plenty of people in attendance, plenty of arts and crafts on display and for sale, and - so I was told, any number of people making actual purchases.

Though obviously on a lower budget, the advertising was well done - the banners hung judiciously throughout the island, and the bougainvillea-trimmed power poles along the road past the Hyatt a nice touch. The only complaint: both times I opted for fish at the food booths, the fish was over-cooked and dried out.

The presence of those U.S. Navy ships was fortuitous - contributing both to the performance offerings and to the foot traffic. The publicity seems even to have reached tourists, this year.

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The Commonwealth Ports Authority, which worked hard in recent months to come up with ways of taxing residents in order to stay solvent - instituting fees for parking at all airports and seaports - was commended during last week's observance of "Ports Week." The CUC, on the other hand, was thoroughly trounced when it tried to do the same thing - raise its rates - in trying to stay solvent. While it's true that use of CPA parking lots is voluntary - sort of - and use of CUC power is not, really, both provide services essential to the entire populace. Doesn't seem fair that only CUC is cast as the villain.

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It's probably premature to be concerned about House Bill 12-378, a bill to set aside \$700,000 for use in identifying "chemicals of concern" in Tanapag, since the Senate has not yet taken any action. One hopes that the Senate does not take action, or if it does, amends it extensively. The bill authorizes the Division of Public Lands to award the contract for searching out those "chemicals of concern" on a sole source basis, for which there is no justification, either in the bill or in actuality, for one. For two, just what those "chemicals of concern" might be, and where one should start looking for them, is not defined. Whoever tries will be looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack - a pretty fruitless task.

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The suggestion, made in a letter to the editor in Wednesday's <I>Variety</I>, to construct

over-pass walkways at places of high pedestrian traffic is an excellent one. They're bound to be cheaper - and a lot easier to maintain - than those experimental solar flashing lights brought in a couple of years ago that had such short lives. And the protection they would provide to everyone from school children to garment workers, the saving of lives, would be worth every penny of the cost.

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One more "Do reporters write with their minds turned off" story - this time involving only the <I>Tribune</I>. The story announces an educational scholarship of \$2,500, but gives neither contact number nor address, no deadline for applying. So what good is the story?

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Last but not least: The story of the CNMI's newest consultant - that retired Marine Corps pilot who was brought in to clean up Garapan - is a perfect example of how to do things wrong. According the 4/25 story in the <I>Variety</I> the consultant proposed plans at his first meeting with the local anti-prosti-tution task force that were possibly unconstitutional, which led an anonymous government official to opine that, though hired on a two month contract, the consultant may not be qualified to solve the island's problems.

The first mistake was the apparent belief that a single person, brought in from the outside, could solve a problem that entire agencies in the CNMI have been unable to resolve. The second mistake was in the hiring process - this consultant apparently was brought in on a sole source contract, without either a competitive bid or valid review of his credentials. The third mistake was the consultant's - voicing opinions without, apparently, taking the time to check out local attitudes, beliefs, customs.

The fourth was rejecting out of hand what, at least on the surface, sounded like some rather creative and ingenious approaches to the problem. The consultant had proposed disconnecting the cell phones used by suspected pimps and prostitutes to limit their ability to communicate. He proposed establishment of a Commonwealth Bureau of Investigation, and the establishment of night court, so arrests could be processed more promptly.

Perhaps we're not getting the full story, but none of those sound all that far-fetched, particularly if they're viewed with a little imagination. For example, if the cell phones can't be confiscated, perhaps their channels could be jammed? If not a separate Bureau of Investigation, perhaps a strengthening of an existing division in the Department of Public Safety? A night court as a division of the Superior Court, just as are Traffic Court and Family Court?

There's a sense of awe and admiration in finding a single incident that so perfectly typifies what not to do in dealing with the hiring of consultants.

