

On My Mind

7/20/01

It's about time someone put together a course/workshop/seminar for legislators. After all, there are training workshops for teachers, for fire-fighters, for emergency medical technicians, for island women, for accountants, for entrepreneurs - for just about everyone else, in fact. So why not one for CNMI's legislators? Why should they be the only ones not offered an opportunity to improve their performance?

At one time, even members of the U.S. Congress were offered a type of orientation - sessions on parliamentary procedure, background on current issues, briefings on national defense and foreign relations - organized by Harvard University for each crop of newly-elected members of Congress.

Similar sessions on parliamentary procedure, on current issues facing the CNMI, and on interrelationships with other Asian and Pacific countries would be equally appropriate for newly-elected members of the CNMI legislature.

In addition, even a cursory reading of the local papers makes it clear that sessions could also be provided to CNMI legislators on the role of the legislature vis-a-vis other government agencies (no micro-management); on the purpose of law-making (no special-interest legislation); on the importance of writing clear, precise and effective law for the long term (no recalls, withdrawals, amendments); on the importance of stability (no arbitrary change to present law); on the sanctity of the constitution (no self-serving initiatives); on long-range planning (no waiting until 2005 to counter NAFTA), on efficient office management practices (no feather-bedding); and in this tight economy, on where and how to cut expenditures without sacrificing service.

Other topics that might be useful: understanding the role and functions of government, effective government organization, creative thinking, productive work habits, accountability, ethics in a changing society....

Logically, it should fall to the Legislative Bureau to pull such a project together. The Bureau could tap any number of individuals and organizations as presenters/speakers. Guidelines may be available from the Council of State Governments or a similar professional organization. The sessions could be scheduled over the Christmas holidays (to take advantage of available classroom space, teachers and faculty) - after the elections and before the inauguration of new legislators.

Would the legislators come? If the speakers were credible, if legislators were included in the planning, if the topics were relevant and the timing convenient, if the names of absentees were made public, how could they refuse?

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As has been said more than once in the last few weeks, at least President Bush's failure to support the Kyoto Protocol has served to draw attention not only to the air pollution problems the Kyoto Protocol addresses, but to the whole area of environmental protection in general. Interest

in and concern about global warming, thought to be caused by air pollution, is no longer only a topic for media science reports, but now appears in the headlines - a political story of international dimensions.

Particularly with the U.S. the largest contributor to the problem, it is more than a little embarrassing that it is the U.S. President who is blocking enactment of the U.N. effort to prevent further damaging climate change in the world. Even more embarrassing is the reason given by Bush: that it's bad for the U. S. economy. Most people recognize - at least in principle - that sometimes the greater good of the whole requires some sacrifice on the part of the individual.

But the ironic thing is that in this case, the "sacrifice" the U.S. would be called upon to make by requiring industries to meet higher emission standards is only temporary. In the long run, it will not hurt the U.S. economy. To the contrary, the U.S. economy will benefit - not only from the "clean-up" industry that will develop, but also from the benefits of clean air that does not poison people, or expanses of water, or crops; that does not corrode buildings, bridges, monuments; that does not contribute to green-house gas and rising ocean levels.

Not only is Bush's stance embarrassingly selfish and parochial; it is also extremely short-sighted. That point does not seem to have been made with any force. Let us hope there are some among the international community who do not let themselves be cowed by the U.S. of A., and who will tell Bush, bluntly and to his face, how petty, how immature, how destructive, his self-serving position really is.

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That the environment is fragile, and deserves continuous care, concern and monitoring was borne out this week by the report, on the front page of the 7/17 issue of <I>Variety</I>, that not only are local plants and trees and the habitats they form in danger of annihilation due to what is called an "introduced" plant - a vine that is not indigenous to the CNMI - but so is that part of the economy that depends on the plants and trees.

Another story this week told of the introduction of "killer fish" in the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, and the havoc the fish - originally imported as a source of food and income to subsistence families, and now found to be attacking fishermen and causing them to bleed to death - are now causing.

In both cases, the "introduced" item was brought in deliberately, without adequate research on the impact it would make on the indigenous environment. In both cases, the results have been unexpected, unwelcome, and, largely, unstoppable. Similar horror stories are told around the world - from the accidentally "introduced" brown tree snake in Guam, to the mongoose in Hawaii, mussels in the Great Lakes.....

Like the human body - made up of many parts that all affect each other and, when they are healthy, work together - the environment is a system of many parts that all affect each other and, when they are healthy, work together. And just as introduction of a "foreign" germ, or virus,

affects the health of the body, so the introduction of a non-indigenous species affects the health of the eco-system that is the environment. One could carry the analogy further: just as the loss of a part of the body - be it finger, leg, lung or kidney - adversely affects the body, so the loss of part of the environment - wetland, virgin forest, mangrove swamp, filled-in beach front - adversely affects the environment.

And while the loss (death) of a human is a loss to mankind, the consequences of loss of natural features of the environment, such as wetland, virgin forest, or even the pristineness of a lagoon, - are far more severe, since the parts of the world's environment - particularly the ocean, the atmosphere - are all inter-connected and inter-dependent.

The environment is our life-line to the future. It deserves care and attention, not wanton destruction.

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The reaction to that anonymous web-site the <I>Tribune</I> featured on the front page of today's paper leaves a lot to be desired. The web-site, in the words of the <I>Trib</I>, "not only denigrates Saipan, but also actively discourages visitors from visiting the island." To which island leaders, media spokesperson, and others have responded, according to the <I>Trib</I> story, that it's not worth commenting on. And that's a pity.

The site may be anonymous, it may be unofficial, but it is out there, and it does make statements that, on the surface, are not all that inaccurate. The website, for example, claims that most of Saipan's political campaign posters contain nothing more than a name and a face. It claims that none of the CNMI's legislators are lawyers, that in fact, some don't even have a college education. Both statements are correct - as far as they go.

What's missing is what is known as "cross-cultural" understanding. The anonymous writer is in need of education, rather than scorn and disavowal. Yes, it gets tiresome to repeat and explain, again and again, the history and the factors that define the CNMI. But if it isn't done, how are people going to learn, and to understand, the differences between their cultural perspective, and and that of the CNMI?

The election posters feature a picture and a name because the CNMI has been, until very recently, an oral culture. And it is small enough (something most other places probably cannot comprehend) that everyone will recognize the faces, even if, in the past, they could not read. Not all CNMI's legislators have more than a high school education because post-secondary education has only become available on island in the past twenty years - and at that, in the early years was only available to teachers. Going off-island was an expense few could afford. That again is something most other places probably have trouble comprehending. But if such things are not explained, how will those outsiders ever understand?

It's sad that such misconceptions are out there. But ignoring them is not the way to correct them.

