

On My Mind

6/13/03

As the grandstanding and name-calling and proclamations of self-righteousness continue in the headlines - and elsewhere - it might be worthwhile to bear in mind that the CNMI's legislators are not all that different from their mainland (or other island) counterparts. Not only is this jockeying for position as election time comes closer pretty typical of all politicians, but it also seems to be typical that it is more hostile, more unconstrained, more rude than in times gone by. National columnists and political professors alike have all commented on the decline of gentlemanly good manners in political dialogue. Which doesn't excuse it, of course.

The difference between this kind of politicking - if it can be called that - on the mainland and here is that on the mainland people don't usually know their legislators so personally. They may know their local district representative, but most constituents live hundreds of miles from the rest of the legislators in their state. Those constituents probably have never met most of their legislators. They don't know those legislators' first names, their families, don't mingle with them at church, the store, at fiestas and fairs and funerals. So the name-calling and the insults reported in the media are just antics in far-off la-la-land to shake one's head about. They don't relate to anyone personally; they don't mean anything personal.

And here, so far at least, legislators haven't gone to the extremes that a bunch of Texas Democrats did to avoid voting on a bill - they chartered a plane and flew out of state, to Oklahoma, where the sergeant-at-arms had no jurisdiction - until the bill they had objected to, died. (The bill would have re-drawn voting district lines to favor the Republicans. The incident gained national attention when it was discovered that the republican legislators tried to get everyone from the FBI to the Homeland security boys to track down where the run-away Democrats had gone.)

Here, of course, it's quite different. Most people DO know most of those who are casting aspersions, and most of those upon whom the aspersions are being cast. People are related to one side or the other, or sometimes to both. That makes it difficult to remain objective, and not take the slings and arrows personally.

Which, of course, also makes compromise, mediation, reconciliation rather difficult.

The solution is not necessarily to vote every such politician out of office, because, assuredly, the next batch is going to do exactly the same thing. Where, then, does solution lie? Perhaps a two-pronged approach would help: having voters let the legislators know that they find the name-calling undignified, unworthy, degrading; and having voters judge legislators by their achievements while in office, rather than their rhetoric - and antics - during campaign times.

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Some things neither the newspapers nor anyone else will tell you if you don't ask:

-the governor has not issued 200+ directives (as might be implied by the fact that it was reported

that he had recently issued Directive # 217). The directives have been numbered sequentially since Teno's time, if not before.

- the CNMI is not relying on only the 150 beetles that have been released so far to combat the invasive purple gourd vine. At least two more batches of beetles will be released over the next several months.

- the fish "poison" used by the Department of Lands and Natural Resources to inventory fish stock in the lagoon does not kill the fish. In fact, fish exposed to the chemical are still edible.

- if Hawaii Pacific Medical Referral does not answer its phone even during its open hours, it does not mean nobody is there. It only means that staff is assisting a walk-in client, and the company gives live warm bodies priority over phone calls.

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On a different level, but nonetheless, something neither the newspapers nor anyone else will tell you unless you ask is that House Speaker Heinz S. Hofschneider and four members of his staff have been busy providing maintenance services to the JoeTen-Kiyu Public Library in Susupe over the past month.

With the help of the Saipan mayor's office staff and equipment, the building's outer walls have been water-blasted and repainted, concrete steps leading up to the building have been cleaned and resurfaced, the retaining wall facing the JoeTen store has been replastered, and the grounds have been cleaned as well. Hofschneider said that there is still work to be done on repairing one of the front doors and the leak in the roof. He said he hoped to get some help from contractors on the latter. Senator Pete P. Reyes and two members of his staff helped out for two full days as well, Hofschneider said.

Now that the library work is finished, the Speaker said he has begun moving operations to the Museum, and to the central park in Garapan. Hofschneider said he and his staff were also maintaining the bus stops in Precinct #3.

Hofschneider said the library and the museum were public not-for-profit institutions which were in need of help because their funding from the legislature was so limited. We all have to do our share, he said.

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In sharp contrast, is the display, over the last few months, of an unbecoming appetite for ever more power on the part of Department of Lands and Natural Resources Secretary Tom Pangelinan. He has bickered for months with the Division of Environmental Quality over responsibility for beach clean-ups, among other things. Now there's been an attack on the Coastal Resource Management Office, again over who has authority to do what. Pangelinan did not appear to suffer from the need to dominate when he served as principal in the Public School System. He may have been outspoken for school, teacher or student needs, but so far as I recall, never attempted to unseat the Commissioner.

So where does this megalomania, this need to be the only boy on the block come from? Surely it's not a question of covetousness - that Pangelinan is after the federal monies DEQ and CRMO are granted each year? Is he aware that much of the funding is due to good research, skillful grant writing, and a good relationship with federal funding agency staff? Does he really think he can achieve the same results using just his own staff?

Both CRMO and DEQ are working very productively as presently constituted; they each are blessed with effective leaders, a strong staff, and a solid record of achievement. Paraphrasing slightly, as CRMO Administrator Jack Salas said, the goal should be to "work together to further improve our environment." Certainly there's enough work to keep all three agencies busy. Pangelinan's current truculent attitude and behavior are irresponsible, disruptive and counterproductive. They are in need of significant review and revision - the sooner the better.

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<I>Short takes:</I> Guam's leaders are scrambling to convince U.S. military forces to station more of their units on Guam, as a means of boosting its economy. The CNMI, rather than attempting to compete with Guam for military bases, should look at the situation as an opportunity to advertise itself as an "R&R" escape for Guam's military. The CNMI has a slower pace, fewer highways, more greenery, more easily accessible beaches. It should, therefore, take pains to protect those qualities, so that it has something different, something unique, to offer that Guam has not.

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It's ironic that Guam has chosen a symbol of weaponry as a token of friendship. The <I>PDN</I> reported earlier this week that its Chamber of Commerce has chosen the slingstone as the shape of a memorial coin that will be "presented to visiting military members, people in the community who have made some kind of contribution, or as a diplomatic gesture when visiting other places."

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The CNMI's CDA - and legislators - should take note: a nominee for Guam's equivalent, has said that potential industries seeking to invest in Guam need to be analyzed first to determine whether or not they would be viable in Guam. "Issues like manpower and infrastructure also need to be researched," said Gerald Perez, former president of DFS Guam, who has been nominated as administrator for the Guam Economic Development and Commerce Authority. "It would require a technical staff...to really run through the process and see whether they're worth pursuing or not" he told Guam senators during his confirmation hearing.

Sounds logical to me.

