

On My Mind
08/08/03

<I>(Upon trying, unsuccessfully, to take in 5 weeks' back issues of </I>Trib<I> and </I>Variety<I> news stories in less than two weeks:</I> School is opening, bringing an end to the so-called "lazy days of summer." And they sure were lazy, slow-moving. Nothing much seems to have changed since summer's beginning, except perhaps the installation of those too small but tourist-friendly - and happily not in MVB's kitschy fake wood style - village directional signs.

All else seems the same. The Senate isn't functioning - the minority making loud noises, the President, like a broken record, issuing platitudes. Not much, sad to state, seems to be happening at the House either, though there the problem seems to be lack of focus, rather than internal strife. The budget remains unresolved. The same old personnel-related issues hound NMC (suits filed by Jack Angello), CUC (the status of Board members), Customs (the status of staff members), CHC (the shortage of medical staff). CDA is still after a land grab, Pellegrino's buy-out still hasn't materialized, the pension checks still are apparently not out.

NMC President Wright is still touting his illusionary, illogical, impractical, unsupportable and unrealistic scheme to support NMC's operation and reduce college tuition at the expense of gullible foreign students. Senate name-calling, threats and suits, still grab headlines. CUC still threatens disconnects, etc., etc., etc.

Yes, the line-ups for November's election have been announced, with some interesting splinterings, some re-alignments, but no real surprises. (Perhaps it was this dearth of new news that prompted both papers to run as front-page stories what could only have been a very embarrassing interfamily spat, but wasn't the least news-worthy?)

And yes, the prison financing bill has finally been signed off by the Governor.

But that's not much of an accomplishment over a summer.

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Usually - though admittedly not always - when things stop working, the instinct is to fix them, to get them working again. The more manageable - and tangible - the problem, the fewer people it takes to fix it. Changing a burnt-out light bulb takes only one person. So does fixing a flat tire.

Fixing a broken appliance might require help outside the family, but still is often only a one-person job.

When something intangible, like management, isn't working, fixing it gets much more difficult. First of all, it requires an acknowledgment that management isn't working - an acknowledgment by management itself as well as by those being managed - who often are the first to recognize the

issue. Sometimes solution can come from within, through problem-solving activities and discussions. But sometimes, it takes outside adjudicators to help both sides work together to resolve the situation.

The same thing holds true when something like government isn't working. Fixing it is much more difficult. It requires an acknowledgment that government isn't working - by those doing the governing as well as by those who are being governed. Theoretically, in at least some cases those governing - as well as those managing - should be able to see that their plans aren't working even before those being governed - or managed - realize it, and should be able (and willing) to do something about it among themselves. But in reality that does not seem to happen all that often.

Thus, in the case of CNMI's government, which is obviously not working, the first step would be for government leaders to acknowledge that they have a problem. (The general population already knows there is a problem.) Unfortunately, there is little chance that this will happen, particularly since it has already been true for quite some time now and no one has yet stepped forth to admit to any concerns.

Traditionally, at least in the U.S., the way to "fix" a non-working government is to elect a different government at the next election, in hopes newly-elected individuals will make a difference. To be sure, in California, some politicians decided they couldn't wait for the next election, and have mounted a recall vote of their newly elected governor - a very expensive and disruptive solution to their discontent.

The people of the CNMI, too, could wait until the elections in November, and for new leaders to come into office in January of next year, and hope that that will make a difference. But that's still five months - nearly half a year - away, and besides, there's not much that says next year's crop will do any better than this year's has done.

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But there is another way to settle differences. Call it negotiation, arbitration, mediation (perhaps some pundit will tell me there are distinct differences), it amounts to a neutral person getting in the middle, and trying to get both sides to come to agreement about whatever the problem was. It's a strategy that's been used in the courts with some success, among countries with occasional success, but never, so far as I know, between a government and its people - or even among government bodies in a single nation.

Yet that doesn't mean it shouldn't be tried. Or couldn't work. If a neutral person had sat down with the Senate President and his supporters and the Senate minority, is it not thinkable that a compromise could have been reached, allowing the Senate to get on with some of its business anyway?

If a neutral person had sat down with the members of the House, is it not possible that they could have hammered out a cohesive agenda, an acceptable budget, and progress on the many other

bills stuck there?

With the Senate and the House functioning, is it not possible that the Governor would have been forced to listen to his constituency, to accept the changes to his budget, to the bills he's submitted?

There is no mechanism for imposing mediation/arbitration/negotiation on the members of the legislature - or elsewhere in government - but perhaps it's time to change that. Perhaps it's time to say, for example, that if no budget is passed by the end of the first quarter, mandatory arbitration must be undertaken. Time to say that if important bills get stuck, government agencies - or a constituency - can demand mediation of the differences. Time to say that if boards and their agencies cannot function, negotiation is called for.

Compromise is a necessity of life. If our leaders will not take the initiative in doing so, perhaps it is time to find ways of forcing them to do so.

Unfortunately, the world as a whole does not give much evidence that compromise, negotiation, discussion, can solve problems, with warfare - murder, rape, pillage - rampant in so many parts of the world today - Afghanistan, Botswana, Chechnya, the Congo, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Liberia, Palestine, the Solomons, to name a few. But has been said before, progress comes one step at a time. There's no reason why the CNMI could not take the first step, and introduce a time-table for the use of intervention in the structure of government.

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Certainly, the depths of depravity to which some have shrunk indicate just how badly such an approach to civility is needed. In Fort Benning, Georgia, of all places, a large oil painting of Saddam Hussein has been placed on the floor in the National Infantry Museum there, so that visitors can walk on it, in keeping with the Iraqi culture of insulting someone by showing him the bottom of one's foot or the sole of one's shoe.