Well, the Azmar mouthpiece has loosed another blast, and what a venomous blast it was! Don Farrell, esteemed author of the only history textbook of the CNMI, fell into the gutter, one might say - or off his pedestal? - in loosing a scurrilous tirade against Cinta Kaipat in a long letter to the editor that appeared in Tuesday's Saipan Tribune.</P></P>

I won't repeat what he said, but it was personal, vindictive, mean-spirited, and totally un-called-for. Cinta is highly regarded in the community, has won honor and recognition for her work in supporting and defending the interests of the CNMI's Northern Islanders, has been instrumental in organizing Pagan Watch, a web site that offers a wealth of information about Pagan and the antics of Azmar and the Marianas Public Land Authority, and has just been nominated by her peers and colleagues for the prestigious Ford Foundation Leadership Award. To drag her name through the mud as Farrell has done is unwarranted, despicable, malicious.

Farrell then goes on at great length about an alleged agreement between the MPLA and Azmar, whereby Azmar had only to provide its "name, rank and serial number," in effect, in order to meet MPLA requirements for being given a lease that would allow it to mine Pagan's pozzolan ash. If it is indeed true, as Farrell alleges, that the MPLA chairwoman told Azmar that it need provide only the name of its business, its charter and by-laws, corporate papers, business license, tax number, personal financial statement and a "revised pro-forma" - whatever that is - and it would be given the lease then she - and all else who agreed - should be fired, immediately.

Moreover, this information was to be provided on a confidential basis! If ever there was a more absurd, irresponsible, ignorant, stupid, offer, I've yet to see it. Imagine! Giving away the rights to an island's minerals with no more than that! No requirement for a business plan, no requirement for a statement of financial stability, no description of the operation involved - nothing! Especially when compared to the extensive requirements made of Pacific Telecom Inc. in the acquisition of MTC, MPLA's stipulation - if true - was and is simplistic indeed!

Farrell is a good writer. No doubt about that. But for reasons known best to himself, he has put his talents to use in support of a company with questionable credentials - one, that, furthermore, has not been able, or willing, to substantiate its claims to respectability and credibility. It's a pity, for it has tarnished his credibility as well, quite badly.

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Another person who's lost credibility - in my eyes, at least - is former House Speaker Heinz Hofschneider, for voting against Congressman Clyde Norita's proposal to make the legislature part-time. A "self-insult" indeed! (which is what Hofschneider labeled the proposal.) Most communities the size of the CNMI - with a total population of less than 100,000, are typically managed by a city manager, or a mayor, not a full-fledged house, senate, executive branch and judiciary!

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And if, as the Covenant says it must, the CNMI has to maintain a bi-cameral legislature in addition to its governor, then at least it could do so on a far smaller scale than it does now.

Indeed, many states, all larger than the CNMI, do not have full time legislators. Contrary to Hofschneider's contention, it is not a "self-insult." Support for a part-time legislature is responsive, responsible, and mature - a recognition that a place this small does not need more, and that its legislators are indeed capable of accomplishing all that is required without the need to spend 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, in doing so.

Hofschneider, and those who voted with him to reject the House committee report in support of a part-time legislature, were both ill-advised and ill-informed, as well as appearing not only greedy but cowardly. The argument that a part-time legislature will create conflicts of interest just doesn't hold up - 39 of the 50 mainland state legislatures operate on a less than full time basis, and conflict of interest does not seem to have been a problem for them. Of course, one must first enact a meaningful ethics code - and observe it. But it obviously can be done. What is a "self-insult," if you will, is that the CNMI's legislators don't believe they are capable of doing so.

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Though in a sense it is now "water over the dam," it's too bad that all those legislators who passed a resolution opposing the granting of citizenship to the stateless individuals didn't aim a little better. It would have made far more sense, and been far better for the CNMI, had they helped the stateless appeal to the U.S. Congress to pass a law on their behalf, rather than leaving the decision to the courts, whose decision may have harmed the integrity of the Covenant. Though that is not yet quite clear - and the stateless have now won citizenship - the bigger battle may be yet to come.

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The cavorting among candidates for this November's election as they jump from one party's banner to another in their attempt to gain advantage is amusing, to say the least. While, in recent years, it has seemed rather obvious, this season's scramble makes in very clear that there currently is little difference in the philosophy, the beliefs, among the various parties. Whether Covenant, Democrat, Independent, or Republican, the terms are just labels. They no longer seem to represent a difference in approach, or particular stands on issues.

Does it matter? Well, if each party did unite within itself to represent a particular point of view, not only would it help in getting support for that position once in office, but it would also give identity to the candidates - and help voters decide for whom to vote. As it stands at the moment, individual personalities, candidate families, and random loyalties, rather than substantive issues, would appear to be the criteria by which voters are left to choose.

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Maybe we should realign things and have three parties, one of which was pro-private sector, one of which was pro-government do-it-all, and one of which represented the interests and concerns of the people?</P>

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One particular personality characteristic I know I will be looking for, especially in the gubernatorial candidates, is an absence of vindictiveness. Those politicians who bear grudges, and would carry them into the performance of their official duties, make very poor candidates indeed. Elected office requires fairness, equal treatment, an open mind, and respect for others - values that are all the more important at present, when so much fear and paranoia is being practiced in Washing-

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With all the evidence apparently now in hand, including a 71-page report from telecommunications consultants Economists.com, there would seem no valid reason for the governor to continue his objection to the sale of MTC to PTI. Yet the governor persists. As the consultant report indicates, the more protracted the governor's continuing objections, the more costs PTI will incur - hardly a promising outlook - though the report indicates that parent Verizon would underwrite most of the cost of any litigation.

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Most telling, perhaps, are the repeated statements of findings in the report by the consultants that (a) the construction of a second fiber-optic cable to Guam just isn't a viable economic option - that MTC/PTI could lease space on its cable at far less than the prohibitive cost of constructing another one, and (b) that divestiture of part of the cable - as the governor has been insisting should be done - would have a significant negative impact on PTI - indeed, it plays a major role in defining a "worst case scenario" in the report.

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In an appendix, Economists.com note, "The other major publicly stated issue that remains unresolved, regarding the sale of MTC to PTI, is pricing and access terms for MTC's inter-island fiber cable to Guam. Economists.com voluntarily undertook an effort to explore whether this issue could b resolved to the satisfaction of Verizon Pacifica and the government of the CNMI. We outlined a framework for testing whether MTC rates for service of the cable are unreasonable, based on either a risk-adjustable return on equity or rates for comparable services (vs similar facilities elsewhere). Unfortunately, the Office of the Attorney General and Verizon were too far apart on the method for such a test of reasonableness and the consequences of the findings. We still feel the differences on the issue could potentially be bridged, but the parties appear to need to build confidence first in each other's commitment to abide by any settlement." (emphasis added.)</E>

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In other words, the consultant company hired jointly by both sides believes that the cable divestiture issue could be resolved through a cooperative effort facilitated by a 3rd party. However, the governor - according to all reports - is now considering taking the issue to court - which is bound to result not only in another long-drawn out battle, but a great amount of unnecessary expense to both sides as well. Not a good sign, when the governor refuses to accept the findings of his own consultants.

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Lastly, a goodie and a baddie (in reverse order) both reported by the Variety in its 2/17 issue: The fine for the failure, by elected and appointed officials, to file annual statements of financial interest, as required by CNMI's Ethics Act, is all of \$10 a day. What a farce! Failure to file should be at least as costly as failure to file campaign costs, which is \$100/day. But will legislators be willing to amend the law? Just watch!</P>

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The goodie: Maggie Sablan is back as executive director of the CNMI Museum! It was a little messy there for a while, but looks like justice and wisdom have prevailed, and the museum is now back in her capable hands. We can all breathe a sigh of relief!