

MICRONESIA'S EDUCATION FOR SELF-GOVERNMENT: FROLICKING IN THE BACKYARD?

Recent political education efforts in Micronesia are floating on a sea of radio tapes, filmstrips, posters and classroom lessons. These are largely the creation of the Education for Self-Government Program mounted by the Trust Territory Administration a year and a half ago. For all its output of materials, the ESG Program labors under serious handicaps. The controversial circumstances surrounding the birth of ESG gave rise to the lurking suspicion that, despite its name, the real object of ESG just might be something less than self-government after all. Many people continued to wonder whether the contents of the program were being "sanitized" by mightier powers than those residing on Saipan.

The ESG task forces on the territory-wide and district levels have lived under this cloud from the very beginning. To make matters worse, it has become fashionable to hold them responsible for any and all failures in the area of political education. Whenever an outer-islander complains to his congressman that he does not know what the status alternatives are all about, ESG takes it on the chin. ESG has become everybody's scapegoat today because it is assumed that it is the major instrument of political education in the Trust Territory. Actually ESG has very little to do with political education and even less to do with authentic education for self-government, as I will try to show. It is, therefore, unfair to blame ESG members, who are performing as well as they can in trying circumstances, for the supposedly meager amount of political education that is taking place today.

The failure of ESG to live up to its name is not due to faulty execution, but the limitations built into the program from the outset. One does not tie a child to a clothesline in the backyard and then complain that he has never explored the other side of the street. Yet ESG is very much the child at the end of the clothesline, confined to the backyard by a solicitous mother who doesn't want her baby to stray into the dangerous road. Education for self-government (or anything else) can't be done without the freedom to explore, notwithstanding the risks. And this freedom ESG does not have!

Despite impressions to the contrary, there apparently is something on which Washington, Capitol Hill on Saipan and the districts do agree, after all: the need to keep political education "clean". That is to say, innocuous!

Definition of political terms and presentation of import-export charts have their place in political education, but they are only the beginning. Once the factual information is in circulation, then the real political education begins. Then the wrestling with issues, the swapping of opinions, and the sometimes heated discussions start to take place among Micronesians. Or it may be, on the other hand, that the facts fall on deaf ears and nothing happens at all. At any rate, what takes place or doesn't take place after the radio program ends with the words "You have heard a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of free association" is of vital importance. But it is at this critical point that ESG's involvement ends.

No one expects ESG or any other political education program to reach into the community and make things happen. It could, however, raise real questions, present divergent opinions, and provoke deep soul-searching among the Micronesian people on their goals for the future. But to do so, it would have to sacrifice its cool objectivity for a bit of passion.

One might wish that ESG would venture into the gutsy issues, the value conflicts, and the clash of aspirations that are at the very eye of Micronesia's political storm these days. But it is unreasonable to expect this, I suppose. The clothesline is far too short to allow ESG to get into such hazardous areas. The overriding concern of practically everyone is for "safe" political education. We do not want to unduly influence anyone, nor do we want to stir up controversy! We simply wish to present facts and encourage polite discussion, but in the most balanced way possible. In the meantime, the man in the village has flicked off his radio with a yawn. What does all this have to do with what is really bothering him today?

There appears to be conspiracy afoot to keep political education as vacuous as possible. The Administration, arguing that it cannot take sides on important political issues, is content to distribute booklets and news-sheets that couch proper platitudes in five-syllable words. The platitudes are promptly translated into the vernacular and transmitted, via the local broadcasting station, to anyone who will listen. In its concern to hold a middle course and keep all parties happy, the government may be succeeding in pleasing none. And, even more important, in educating none!

The Administration's concern to maintain a neutral stance on important political issues is laudable, but this concern can easily become obsessive. If it

prevents government-sponsored programs from laying bare the issues for fear of leaning slightly to one side or the other, then the concern is a real obstruction to political education. When competent and dedicated Micronesian civil servants prefer to do nothing at all in the area of political education rather than lay themselves open to the charge of steering people down one political alley, the concern for objectivity is overdone.

The fear of one-sided political education may have reached the proportions of a real phobia in Micronesia today. If a private group should intervene to rip open the platitudes and examine the issues, it is often held suspect of the worst of all crimes—partisanship. Who knows but that the group may be trying to influence the people! This phobia probably accounts for the widespread feeling that political education is somehow illegitimate if it is not duly authorized by the Administration. It would not be pushing the point much further if the government actually were to license political education just as it does businesses. That way we can all remain in the backyard together while the action is taking place on the other side of the street.

Whether anything can be done to improve the calibre of political education in the Trust Territory depends on the willingness of the Administration to untie the baby from the clothesline and let it wander out of the backyard. This bold move, of course, might take it into any number of "unsafe" areas. But the overall effect, in my opinion, would be to make the efforts of ESG and local programs much more meaningful and effective. There are at least four important dimensions of good political education for self-government that are currently being neglected. It is with the desire to help remedy this situation that I make the following recommendations.

First of all, education for self-government must embrace as its final goal full self-government. Only if it takes this long view will ESG live up to the ambitious name it has adopted for itself. Now it is no secret that full self-government must ultimately lead down one of two paths: either virtual independence or full incorporation into another sovereign state. The Micronesian people's choice is rather simple over the long run—independence (or something akin to it) or American statehood. Anything short of either one of these statuses appears to be a rather unstable formula, as the recent political ferment in Guam

clearly indicates. Free Association itself—that much discussed and little understood option—would almost certainly gravitate in time towards one or the other of these.

The best interests of the Micronesian people are not served if we bury this fact beneath a mountain of politico-legal distinctions. The basic issue that they must have always before their eyes is which of these two paths they wish to follow and what they hope to find at the end of the road. There can be no hedging in our presentation of this issue, if we wish to deal openly and honestly with Micronesia's ultimate goals.

This is not to say that the three current political status options should not be presented and discussed. But if ESG or any other program is not always mindful of the fact that there are two simple realities at the end of the road, it will not accomplish its avowed purpose of preparing people for self-government in its fullest sense. Instead, it will only strangle them with a mouthful of jargon, while perpetuating the fantasy that a choice between these forms of self-government may not be necessary after all.

ESG cannot direct people's attention to the fork at the end of the road as long as independence remains a dirty word in government circles. My impression is that Micronesian employees are afraid to discuss independence as a serious political goal out of fear that this would virtually be an act of treason towards the present Administration. It is hard to avoid the impression that the word "independence" has found a secure place next to the other obscenities usually written on toilet walls. It may be that most Micronesians would not wish to seriously entertain the thought of independence as a future goal for the Trust Territory, but they should at least feel free enough to discuss the issue plainly and openly without resort to furtive whispers and quick glances to see who's watching. It is one thing to openly dismiss independence as a utopian dream that cannot possibly be achieved by Micronesia, and quite another to avoid thrashing out the question for fear of real or imaginary repercussions.

Both independence and full absorption into the US, then, should receive the frank treatment in political education programs that they deserve. Delaying candid discussion of this long-range option until such time as the immediate status questions are resolved might well be to deny the Micronesian people any chance to

make their most important political choice of all, for by that time they may have slipped blindly onto an inevitable course towards one or the other.

My second suggestion regarding political education is that it be controversial. I do not mean by this that government-sponsored programs should advocate one particular status over the others (not that this is a very real danger, given the controls under which ESG operates). Nor do I mean that good political education should incite citizens to hurl rocks or mean epithets at one another. These are forms of violence, always deplorable and non-productive, not signs of constructive controversy.

If political education does what it is meant to do—that is, lay bare the vital issues that underlie political decisions—it is bound to lead to differences of opinion among the population. The formation of partisan groups with strongly held positions on the issues of the day is the most eloquent testimony to the success of political education efforts in any free nation. Conversely, the absence of such groups can be an indication that a political education crusade has not generated the awareness that it should have, perhaps because it has failed to delve into the critical issues that most deeply affect people.

Consensus that is purchased at the price of ignoring these issues is bound to be hollow indeed, as Micronesian leaders are learning these days. The temptation to sweep potentially divisive issues under the rug so as to avoid controversy only leads to more troublesome conflicts in the future. I am not arguing that controversy needs to be handled in the blunt American manner rather than through other subtler means; I am simply stating that it needs to be encouraged and resolved, whatever the means used.

If Micronesians intend to make their own the democratic forms that have been thrust upon them in the last thirty years, then they should be aware that the genius of American democratic institutions lies in their ability, not just to tolerate controversy, but to provoke it and to turn it into a powerful educational tool. Democratic institutions seems singularly designed to encourage the population to raise strong voices for and against any public issue. There is a confidence, based on 200 years of experience, that when the shouting has subsided and people are the wiser for what they have heard, real consensus is possible.

Political education in America has never really been the province of the government. Most instances of heightened political awareness, in America as in Micronesia today, have been achieved in the course of public debate following an act of government. The resignation of Richard Nixon was perhaps the most striking example of successful political education within recent U.S. history. Likewise, the controversy surrounding the return of public land or the flurry caused by the Marshallese delegation's demand for equal revenue-sharing may be the greatest forces for political education in Micronesia today. If so, this fact should be recognized by the Administration.

It should be obvious that partisan groups are not in competition with government-sponsored programs such as ESG. In fact, they have a vital role to play in fostering the open exchange of views necessary for the education of the public on controversial issues. In their zeal for impartiality, Americans serving in the Trust Territory are sometimes quick to forget the long-tradition of pamphleteering that extends back to pre-Revolutionary War days in their own country. America's own political self-education and subsequent choice of status was not accomplished by bland fact sheets and impartial public talks, but amidst fiery political harangues and inflammatory handbills that were issued from the cellars of the revolutionaries. There was nothing antiseptic about the literature to which the early colonists were treated. What would they have thought of the controversy-free radio talks and the soporific publications that form the bulk of political education material today?

If critical issues today are too often embalmed in cold and dispassionate prose, ESG should not be made to bear all the blame. Radio stations in some districts have refused to play tapes advocating a particular stand on these issues, even though the radio is our twentieth century equivalent of Tom Paine's printing press. Local officials have sometimes discouraged student political movements on the grounds that they are subversive. While such things were presumably done in the interest of keeping political education in the TT as "objective" as possible, these and similar examples reveal a thorough misunderstanding of the nature of political education. It would be rather ironic if Americans, who profess such a strong faith in the good sense of the "common folk", or those Micronesians who think the same way should feel obliged to protect the "common folk" of Micronesia from being misled by the rhetoric of advocacy groups. If the people are to rule, then one must give them credit for some good sense after all.

One of the most successful political education efforts I have heard was a series of radio programs prepared for the Trukese people by the "Anti-Independence Coalition" and the "Independence Advocates" here. A speech in favor of Free Association was answered the following week by one advocating Independence. This lively exchange of views produced strong interest among people who would not otherwise have bothered to listen to political education broadcasts. When someone argued on one of the programs that political independence would mean fewer 40-HP outboard engines, fewer Datsuns, and fewer gold teeth, people understood. They were also quick to grasp the significance of the counter-argument: That there are very few gifts without strings attached and that Micronesians may find themselves paying for the lavish subsidy they now receive with their culture and their land. Micronesians listened and learned because these were flesh-and-blood issues.

My third observation is that any worthwhile education for self-government must deliberately promote, in whatever way it can, a true spirit of nationalism among people.

The mere mention of the word "nationalism" often seems to cause a good bit of embarrassment in polite government circles. One reason for this is undoubtedly the political overtones that the word carries with it: "We are determined to do our own thing even if it means severing all political ties with the U.S." Another is the fear of excesses that have often been associated with extreme nationalism elsewhere in the world: attacks on embassy buildings, political riots, and violent manifestations of bitter hatred for all foreigners. But nationalism need not mean either radical isolationism or a hate campaign against outsiders, and I clearly do not intend to use the word in this sense.

Nationalism might be better understood to mean a compelling spirit of national identity among a people. It is what happens to individuals in a state as they are discovering that they are really a people. A healthy nationalism carries with it robust feelings of self-confidence and pride—"We can be ourselves in spite of everything!"

Although often rooted in a shared language and cultures, a sense of national identity can be forged for people from various cultural and linguistic groups, as the national experience of the Philippines, Indonesia or America testifies. A sense of common purpose based on national goals is indispensable in fashioning a common

identity for a multi-cultural society. Shared past experiences—such as three-quarters of a century of colonial rule—and common aspirations for the future are often the materials from which a new national identity is created.

Too often in Micronesia today, talk turns to unity when it should instead center on nationalism. If a national identity, with the common goals and single sense of purpose that it implies, is really the basis of unity among a people, then the proper question for Micronesians who desire the unification of these islands to ask is: "What can we do to create a national identity?" People do not unite unless there is some reason to do so. Do Micronesians today possess a sense of common purpose, a shared vision of the future? If they do not but desire one, then one of the principal objectives of a political education should be to help build up, in any way possible, a true spirit of national identity.

Even if the districts should reject pan-Micronesian unity and choose to follow separate paths, the problem of national identity would remain. The people of the Marshalls or of the Marianas would still need "national" goals and an assertion of their self-identity, although the task is much simpler within a single cultural group. A healthy spirit of nationalism, it seems to me, is indispensable for any people on the threshold of self-government.

Some would disagree with this. They argue that in a world which is growing more and more interdependent every day, it is internationalism—not nationalism—that needs to be encouraged. They are only partly right, I think. They fail to see that nationalism may be every bit as essential a stage in a people's growth towards internationalism as the teenager's struggle to express his independence is towards a balanced interpersonalism later on. Neither individuals nor nations grow up all at once. If they are ever to be able to achieve a balanced relationship with others, they must struggle through their own identity crises first. Those who propose to eliminate the troublesome stage of nationalism should ponder whether a people can ever be contributors to the world community before they have found out how to be themselves.

Any program that professes to prepare people for self-government, then, must promote genuine nationalism. Not apologetically, but boldly and purposefully! The message must come through loud and clear: "We are Micronesians! We're different and we're proud of it!" If this message is mistaken by Americans or

anybody else as empty bravado or spiteful posturing, that is regrettable. But fear of being misunderstood by others cannot be allowed to check the efforts of Micronesians to find and express their nascent sense of identity. Otherwise, the future may bring more hostile outbursts of nationalism than any that might occur today. They will be born of the frustration and anger that is felt by tomorrow's generation when they reflect on their recent past: "We were searching for ourselves, and all you gave us was bulldozers and buildings!" Such will be their legitimate complaint against the government that was supposed to help them achieve national maturity.

My final observation on authentic education for self-government is that it be experiential, not just conceptual. A spirited discussion of the issues and adequate information, while important, are not enough to prepare people to take into their hands their own government. They must learn how to actually govern themselves. This Micronesians will learn not through manuals or directives, but by doing it, first in smaller ways and then in larger.

Micronesian leaders have been quick to learn the administrative skills necessary for self-government. A glance at the roster of department heads and other top-level officials reveals that Micronesians now occupy most of the key positions in the Trust Territory government, as the Administration never tires of telling us. But self-administration is not at all the same thing as self-government!

People who are learning self-government need, first of all, to develop the confidence that they can truly handle their own affairs. For Micronesians this means the actual experience of analyzing problems and finding the means to solve these problems on both day-to-day and long-range basis. This is true whether we are talking about the Congress of Micronesia or the tiniest village council. Any political entity must be able to identify its problems and summon the resources at its disposal to solve the problem. Only then does it have real power. Only then can it be said to exercise any degree of self-government.

At the present time there are any number of communities in Micronesia that have shown themselves capable of identifying their needs. They must have a basketball court—or a power source, or a new high school, or a bilingual program, or a convention hall! If self-government means only the ability to pinpoint the need and draw up a petition for aid to be submitted to someone else, then Micronesia is

well on its way to self-government. But if it means developing a confidence in one's own resources to answer the need, then Micronesia is moving further away from self-government.

Self-government, in the view presented here, implies the ability to cope with one's own problems. It is rooted in the ability to make decisions and have them stick. It is founded on the "can do" type of spirit that seems so noticeably absent in many quarters of Micronesia today. What we encounter so often these days is a very different kind of attitude: "We can do—if HEW or Interior lets us!" This is hardly the kind of thinking that forms a strong foundation for self-government. But how could it be otherwise when there is such widespread concern for developing everything, from dispensaries to disposal systems, except self-reliant communities?

Millions of dollars may be spent for political education, but if Micronesians do not begin to experience the type of satisfaction that comes from caring for themselves, the most important lesson of all will be lost and the money wasted. A single classroom constructed by a village probably would do more to educate people for self-government than all of the eloquence from the floor of the congressional chambers for the past ten years.

Perhaps there is little that the ESG Program itself can do to remedy this situation, since the causes of the problem lie far beyond the perimeters within which ESG operates. The same may be true with respect to some of the other points made in this article. That is why I stated earlier that the Program has little to do with real education for self-government. If government-sponsored programs are to remain confined to the backyard, then others must assume the responsibility for venturing into these vital areas. On no account, though, can Micronesia sit back comfortably and assume that the real job of educating its people for self-government is being done. It has yet to begin.