



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR  
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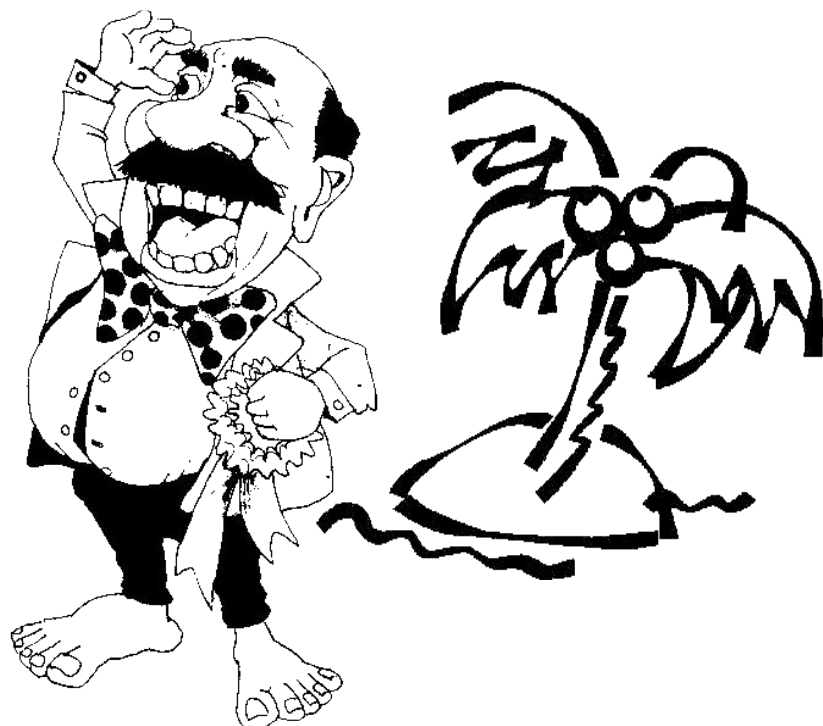


# Micronesian Counselor

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Issue 67

## *Island Politics*



### **New MicSem email addresses!**

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**Got Music??... MicSem is collecting local music!**  
*Contribute your collection and we will provide a digital copy!*

*Francis X. Hezel, S.J.*

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## Keep Out: Political Property

“Aren’t you church people supposed to stay out of politics?” he asked me. He was a public official objecting to an article that I had written about a lawsuit that the Government of the Marshall Islands had lodged against Big Tobacco seeking millions of dollars in damages for the harm that smoking had done in the islands. In the article I did not challenge the harmful impact of smoking on the population, only on the matter of who should be assigned the blame—the tobacco companies, the RMI Government (which until then had done little to counter the advertising), or the smokers themselves. But the official’s point was that such activity was inappropriate for me, a churchman, since church and politics were not to be mixed. Why couldn’t I be content with doing what I was supposed to do: pray for people, lead church services, and bless funerals, weddings and newly born babies?

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What are we to think when a Micronesian asks about the long delays in a community development project... and is answered with a shrug of the shoulders and the single word “politics”.

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There may have been some justification in his attempt to warn me off what he regarded as political territory, but what about the others, especially citizens, who try to poke around this fenced off area? What are we to think when a Micronesian (who holds no church office) asks about the long delays in a community development project, whether the construction of a new school or work on a road, and is answered with a shrug of the shoulders and the single word “politics.” He could pursue the point and ask further questions about what is going on, but he knows that he stands a good chance of being rebuffed. The final reply might be more politely worded, but often enough the substance runs something along these lines: “You don’t have any idea how things work in the political arena. Why don’t you just leave all that to the initiated?”

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## New Video!

[www.micsem.org](http://www.micsem.org)

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### TO CHEW OR NOT TO CHEW



A young man tries to make the big decision as he wends his way through the wacky world of betelnut users. Along the way, he makes some first-hand observations—but in the end he decides to pass on it. This wild ride through the world of betelnut offers plenty of laughs and lots to think about.

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## Publications

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### MICRONESIA:

#### WINDS OF CHANGE (reprinted)

This coffee table history book of Micronesia offers plenty of illustrations to capture the attention of all ages. First published in 1980, the newly reprinted version is now available in hardback at Micronesian Seminar for only \$35.00! Or order online at [www.micsem.org/zen\\_cart/index.php](http://www.micsem.org/zen_cart/index.php).

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## Schools

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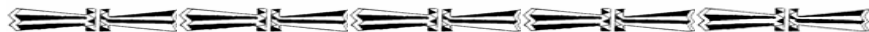
### Chuuk-Faichuk Elementary Schools

“Report cards” of **Chuuk** and **Faichuk** elementary schools have been added to our website. The information provided includes photos and status reports of each school. See the following link for reviews of both Chuuk and Pohnpei elementary schools  
[www.micsem.org/schools/index.htm](http://www.micsem.org/schools/index.htm).

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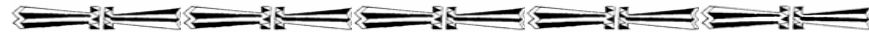
*We have changed our email address!*

See the back cover for full list of new email addresses.



In short, the common thinking of elected officials seems to be taking this shape. “Politics is much more encompassing than we at first thought, even though there are few people with even fewer working hours to attend to these critical issues. Still, let’s keep out the uninitiated and reserve the expanding territory for ourselves. After all, it’s a matter of our own livelihood and our status at stake.”

No elected official would ever admit to seeing his position reflected in this past paragraph, but on the whole this seems to be the direction in which the region has been moving. For that matter, the entire globe. Perhaps we are unable to reverse this direction completely, but as a start we could at least allow the public and their organizations to reclaim some of the ground they have lost since the territory labeled “political” has been sealed off to them.



People who inquire about the status of public schools may be told that they are touching on a politically sensitive area. Public education a politically sensitive topic? Perhaps because the director of education was appointed by an elected official, and so any criticism of the schools can be taken as an implicit criticism of the current administration. The same thing applies to dispensaries, hospitals, field trip ships, or any kind of public service. Any indiscreet inquiries that might suggest that these services were not performing up to expectation could be regarded as an unwanted intrusion into the realm of the political.

This raises some important questions for all of us. What exactly is that unmapped area known as politics? Where should the boundaries be located, not just between church and politics, but between critical evaluation of government performance in the delivery of its public services and political defamation? What about the boundaries between politics and the rest of human life, for that matter?

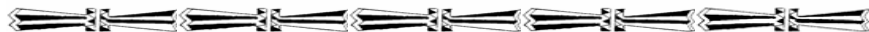
### *Expanding Political Boundaries*

It’s not a bad idea to keep some signs posted at the political boundaries (providing we know where they are). Church people from abroad should be expected to understand that there are legitimate boundaries between church and state. Nor is there anything wrong in warning non-citizens away from politics—in the true sense of the word. Islanders lived under foreign rule for a century or more, and no one should deny Micronesians the right to run their own country at long last. The very least we expatriates can do is to honor the political processes they have established through their own constitutions and keep a respectful distance away from partisan politics to allow these political processes to operate as they should.

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“The art or science of winning or maintaining control of the government” is the way my dictionary defines politics. But now the word embraces all manner of things.

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Denial of access to local people, however, is another matter. Aren't they supposed to be encouraged to know as much as they can about the political processes, the better to control them? Isn't this what government "by the people" means at bottom? Are they to be discouraged from tracking progress in the public services that deeply affect them, leaving this instead to a group of professional politicians?

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Instead, "No Trespassing" signs remain firmly posted, even as the territory designated as "political" keeps growing..

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Instead, "No Trespassing" signs remain firmly posted, even as the territory designated as "political" keeps growing. When the unwary visitor thinks he is safely outside the boundaries and thinks that he can engage in a conversation about some personal concern, he is suddenly informed that he has trespassed. The markers have been pulled up and moved out again. Once more he encounters the shrug of the shoulders and the warning that he has stumbled onto political terrain.

Where does the political end? Education and health is terrain that may be staked out as political, and economic development and employment may be claimed as political territory, too. Decisions on what projects to endorse or whom to hire or fire may be termed political. Even the so-called "social sins"—activities like prostitution, gambling and drinking—may at times be regarded as politically sensitive topics. What, then, is there left to discuss freely? Whichever way we go, we seem to be stumbling into signs that warn us off political issues.

Politics is a term that covers a great deal in most countries, but in our island societies it seems to include nearly everything. Once it was used to describe elections and the candidacy of individuals for elected public office—"the art or science of winning or maintaining control of the



the long run, as recent events in some parts of Micronesia have demonstrated. People may get what they think they want, but this isn't always what they need, as any parent or anyone who has ever spent time in the classroom knows.

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If the elected official's concern for retaining his position overrides his concern for the genuine public good and the future of his nation or state, he will yield to popular pressure and allow himself to be led rather than to lead.

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### *Conclusion*

If we are to toss around the word politics as glibly as we do, it may be time to take a long, hard look at what the word originally meant and what it could and should mean for us today in Micronesia. Once upon a time, the word politics was invested with a nobility that it seems to have lost in our day. Politics, as it is used now, is an excuse for shift behavior and dubious principles. At one time, elected office in Micronesia was almost a matter of indifference, but it has now become the aspiration of nearly every school child and young adult.

Meanwhile, politics has apparently come to cover ever more territory in the life of our societies, so that even the terrain of education, health and other social services is now being staked out as political territory. It's not just foreigners and NGOs that are being warned off, but even citizens who would like to do more to improve the government's performance in these areas. At the same time, elected officials themselves are increasingly occupied in keeping their constituency happy so as to retain their positions. As their energies are absorbed more and more in maintaining their political support base, matters of greater importance, such as the improvement of government services and national development, may be relegated to an after-thought and handled on an as-time-allows basis.



behalf of the people. But this would be to leave the political figure's job half-done. It would be to pander to the people, to offer them cheap gratification, not to educate them.

Elected officials who undervalue the potential of their people are quick to make handouts to their people, giving them sacks of rice or take-out dishes instead of insight into decisions that will affect their lives. If they trusted their people more, they might be willing to throw open the doors of their chambers and let people listen in on what is happening. They might understand that transparency is not just a catchword that foreign consultants bandy about, but a necessary condition if citizens are ever to progress in their understanding of their government to the point where they are full participants in it. They would also understand that the sharpest critics, whether the press or NGOs or churches, in reality can often be their most valuable allies in carrying out this educational mission.

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Once elected officials have made their efforts to educate the people they represent, they are still obliged to do what leaders must do—namely, lead. If they simply wait for their people to endorse every measure they pass, they and their country are doomed. How can government officials ever expect the enthusiastic support of citizens for tax increases, enforcement of better tax collection procedures, tougher conservation laws that impact on what private landowners believe are their rights, eminent domain for acquisition of needed government land, reduction in the number of government employees, and other such measures? If the elected official's concern for retaining his position overrides his concern for the genuine public good and the future of his nation or state, he will yield to popular pressure and allow himself to be led rather than to lead. The result will be disastrous for his people in



government" is the way my dictionary defines politics. But now the word embraces all manner of things. Like a huge tarpaulin stretched over the back of a truck to protect against the rain, it covers cargo, people and spare tires. Like a spreading fungus, it threatens to infect everything. Or should we compare it to a toxic gas that seeps into every corner of the house? Is there anywhere in society today that is politics-free?

### *Can There Be Boundaries?*

Why shouldn't politics be all-encompassing in Micronesia? After all, just about everything is inter-related in small island societies, just as nearly *everyone* is. A businessman who is also a political office-holder, for example, can claim that any effort to interfere in his business interests is in fact an effort to discredit him politically. On the other hand, his political opponents can make the counter-charge that the success of his business is probably due to his misuse of his political influence, or even the improper channeling of the funds over which he might exercise control into his holdings. If his relatives or political supporters have commercial interests of their own, they might also be accused of benefiting from his political office. If this same individual has a church leadership role—and this is not infrequently the case—then he might be tempted to use this position to rally support for his political career. Or at least he might easily be charged with attempting to do so.

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So we are left with a big fuzzball. Business, church, family and government are all intertwined sectors. How can they be separated out from one another, and how might political issues be distinguished from the personalities with whom they are closely tied? All this makes for very blurred boundaries between politics and other sectors, not to mention between political issues and personalities.



Sorting out this amalgam can be extremely difficult, especially in a small society in which a relatively few individuals have large responsibility and influence in a number of different areas. Because of their overlapping roles and the prestige they enjoy as a consequence, it is not easy to focus narrowly on the political office and, further, to distinguish between the person and the office he holds. The distinction is difficult perhaps, but not impossible. It is also necessary. Otherwise, the public will never be able to hold their elected officials accountable for fulfilling their responsibility to the public. But it's also necessary in order to protect those public officials who do carry out their responsibilities from unwarranted personal charges of improperly using public office for their own ends.



Much larger nations like the US have developed procedures for dealing with this problem. First, they have enacted legislation requiring disclosure of finances, including business interests and stockholdings, in the interest of transparency so that the public can sniff out any potential shady dealings. Second, there are

conflict of interest laws that forbid public officials from directly benefiting in any way from public projects or other activities that they had a hand in legislating. Third, the media is encouraged to sniff around so as to pick up the scent of anything suspicious. All this, of course, is designed to prevent unseemly intrusion of the personal interests on the public good.

But will this work in Micronesia? People often complain about conflict of interest in government circles, but legislation is still largely untried. Although a successful effort was made to enforce the walls of separation between the three branches of the government back in Trust Territory days in the late 1960s, no similar effort was made to enact legislation aimed at preventing other possible conflicts of interest. Anyone who held a position in the district government was prohibited from running for the legislature unless he surrendered his government

today? Where is the sound of the bugle calling them to a noble purpose? If this sounds too quixotic, too hopelessly romantic, then maybe the time has come to recapture the vision that drove the founders of these island nations thirty or forty years ago. Then there were nations to build; now there are nations to *rebuild*.

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In a republic, elected officials are expected to govern on behalf of the people they represent and serve... they are to look beyond their own personal interests to those of their constituents, and even beyond the latter to the good of the country they serve.

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Politics means care of the *polis*—the nation-state and its citizens—even before it means gaining and maintaining public office. It does not mean enrichment at the expense of the national treasury, but dedication to the public good even at personal expense. Politics should mean not a face-saving defense of the status quo, no matter how bad the status quo is, but a singular commitment to spurring the improvement of the government and the vital public services it provides for people.

### *The Genuine Task of a Politician*

A representative government is a trade-off. It confers on the elected official status and income and the authority to make decisions, but it also entitles ordinary citizens to expect something of the persons they put in office. Not just “loans”—the request from constituents for money which we all know will never be repaid—but something that may be even more of a headache: endless explanations of controversial decisions and why they were made. Like it or not, elected officials are also educators. They must have the patience to explain again and again the workings of situations that their constituents will only half understand. Admittedly, it's easier for the elected official to reach into his wallet, extract a few bills, and send his constituent on his way with the admonition to trust in the official to make the right decisions on

the excitement of the political game. It is even more difficult to lose the power to control events. No wonder candidates for public office, especially incumbents, who are unsuccessful in their bid for election so often take the results personally. No wonder so much of the energy and time that ought to go into piloting the government are diverted into election or re-election campaigns.

### ***Back to the Ideal***

In ancient Greece, the true homeland of democracy, citizens were expected to contribute a share of their time and wealth to political affairs—that is, the governing of the nation-state, or *polis*. Each person could be called on to take the leadership position of *archon* for a limited time, even without adequate reimbursement for the responsibility. Some did so reluctantly, others eagerly, but all understood that this was part of the price they paid for the privilege of citizenship in a free state.



A few hundred years later, Rome developed a republican government with senators chosen to represent the interests of their people. The tradition of “rule by the people” was later embodied in this form as it crossed the Atlantic and was adopted by the former British colonies in what is now the USA. In a republic, elected officials are expected to govern on behalf of the people they represent and serve. To be sure, they are well compensated for their service, but the ideal remains: they are to look beyond their own personal interests to those of their constituents, and even beyond the latter to the good of the country they serve. Elected officials may fall well short of this ideal at times, but the ideal itself stands.

These new Pacific nations would do well to recall this ideal when cynicism begins to set in, when an elective position is viewed more as a job than a mission, when an official’s personal status overrides the public good. Where are the stars in the eyes of our political candidates

job, but there were no barriers to keep a public official from using his position to toss money in the direction of his business. There was nothing to prevent him from granting a contract to his own construction company, or leasing or purchasing for a new public project land that he himself owned, or arranging for government-sponsored receptions in his own facility.

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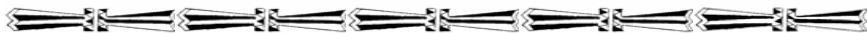
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The absence of conflict of interest laws stems from a day, in the 1970s, when nearly all the members of the old Congress of Micronesia had business interests of one sort or another. The joke in those days was that the Economic Development Loan Fund (EDLF), a government-funded source of loans for private business development, was the exclusive plaything of the Congress. EDLF has passed away and the old Congress is a thing of the past, but the problem of conflict of interest continues. Perhaps the time has come to remedy this oversight.

### ***The Human Energy Crisis***

Just as politics has grown to embrace most of what happens in society, it also absorbs an enormous amount of human energy, energy that might be better spent elsewhere. The time and effort that goes into campaigning for office is considerable—but we need not quibble about this. Most people have made their peace with the weeks or months that government officials are out of the office on the campaign trail. Think, however, of the time and energy that those who have been elected put into cultivating political allies and enlarging their network of clients so that they can maintain their position in the next elections. If somehow



this energy could be converted into positive programs, imagine what the government systems and the public services would be like. If it could be magically transformed somehow into electrical power, we could keep the lights on for months at a time with the power generated.

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In a small society there is a limited pool of capable personnel. If these few people dedicate a disproportionate amount of their time to political back-covering, then other important tasks will be neglected. The focus on political wheeling and dealing only magnifies the inefficiencies, found here as in any small developing nation, that already impede output in government offices. One prominent government official, after admitting that he had to spend a great deal of his time ensuring his re-election, explained that if he were to lose his seat he would not be able to do for his people all that he envisioned. Even so, there are many elected officials who never quite seem to find that extra time needed to launch the ambitious program that they advanced in their early campaigns.

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Is it too utopian to suggest that their first and major concern ought to be not so much to capture the vote as to capture a vision of what they want their country to look like?

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The issue here is not protecting government funds from misuse, but directing the energies of government officials toward the advancement of public programs. Many of us would like to believe that the main work of government officials is to ensure that the schools are truly



an income for relatives or political allies. Whether or not the offices formed to provide these jobs are productive, the appointees are almost sure to retain their positions. The net result is that the government payroll is expanded and the cost of government increases at a time when streamlining for efficiency is so badly needed. The demand for improved performance and more effective government service goes unheeded because of the importance of maintaining political allies, to say nothing of taking care of friends and family. We can all understand the strength of personal relationships in a Pacific society, but should elected officials honor these ties even at the expense of the public interest, especially when money is short and there is a clamor for improved government services?

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The greatest cause for concern, though, has less to do with the accumulation of funds than with the accumulation of power. Outright theft of public funds seems to be rare, misuse or waste of funds much more common, but the greatest temptation is not greed but lust for power. In the Pacific money has always been valued primarily because it can be so easily converted into social capital. Representation funds or pork barrel money doesn't buy real estate in Honolulu, but it does buy votes. The ultimate aim of political figures is not affluence so much as influence. Wealth is only a means to an end—that of achieving prominence in the community and perhaps being regarded as a kingpin. It was that sort of prestige that stood as the highest social goal in most traditional island cultures.

Power, as we know, is highly addictive. Politics provides much more than a good income and some fame; it offers the satisfaction of knowing that one is in charge (even if that is not entirely the case). Once an individual holds a high elective office, it is difficult to surrender that power and sit quietly on the sidelines as others engage in



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and politics, once little more than a formality, turned into serious business—so serious that it has terminated friendships and divided families, communities and even churches. There are villages in which political breaches have brought about a schism in the local church and

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“Behold...I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...” What the gospel could not do, Micronesian politics has achieved.

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led to the founding of a rival one; the theological differences are non-existent, but the political hostility between them is palpable. Thus is that passage in Scripture fulfilled: “Behold, I have come not to bring peace but the sword, for I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...” (Matt 10:34-35). What the gospel could not do, Micronesian politics has achieved.

### “Dirty Politics”

We often hear it said that major political figures in the islands are becoming rich through their office. While there have been some instances of flagrant misuse of public funds that have attracted public attention, it does not seem to be an everyday problem. If it were, a story about the misuse of public funds would not be as noteworthy as it still is. Corruption is probably no worse in Micronesia than it is anywhere else and almost certainly less flagrant than in developing countries in other parts of the world. This doesn’t mean that there are no serious problems with politics in Micronesia; it just means that the most serious ones are misidentified.



Even if outright theft of public funds is not the main issue, there are enormous inefficiencies in the government system due at least in part to the way politics works. Government jobs are often dispensed as political patronage so as to provide

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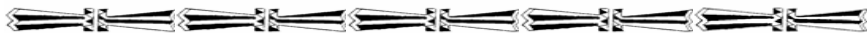
educating the young, that the hospitals and dispensaries are curing the sick and preventing the spread of disease, that the quality of the infrastructure is something we can all be proud of, that all the people have the public services they so badly need. How can they hope to do this if the sum total of their energy is spent in political cabals strengthening political ties and devising strategies for the next election? When elected officials revel too much in the stratagems of winning and holding office, the ideal of the government official as “public servant” can easily be eclipsed. Is it too utopian to suggest that their first and major concern ought to be not so much to capture the vote as to capture a vision of what they want their country to look like? The first and most important task at hand, after all, is to build a nation.

### The Evolution of Politics

Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, when I was still teaching high school, I used to hear young people, with unfeigned earnestness in their eyes, tell me that they had decided to run for public office so that they could help their people. To this I would usually reply that there are many other ways of “helping your people,” none of them probably quite as frustrating and perilous as public office. Their face would drop as they realized that someone was questioning the wisdom of their choice, perhaps even their motives.



Political life, of course, is much more than a chance to help one’s people. For years now politics has become, in the eyes of most island people, the single most important avenue of advancement. Elected office brings a respectable income, public acclaim and name recognition, and a large audience before which to perform, among other things. In a society in which there are few other ways of making one’s mark, where business success is more uncertain than ever, political life has an undeniable attraction. The old saying is truer than ever: If you want to get ahead, go into politics.



It wasn't always this way. I recall a simpler day, at Xavier High School back in the 1960s, when students nominated to run for student council president "campaigned" by suggesting that everyone vote for their opponent since they themselves weren't really worth voting for anyway. At that time there was still something repugnant to Micronesians about speaking on behalf of themselves and, even worse, making a plea for votes.

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The politics of elected office, when it was introduced by the US Navy after World War II, was a non-issue. In those early elections, the people of most places simply elected traditional leaders as their magistrates or elected representatives to the council. If, for some reason, the traditional leaders preferred not to serve in this position, they simply named someone to run in their stead. There was no drama surrounding elections; they were non-events—even as they remained in Yap for many years, until perhaps ten or fifteen years ago.

In time, however, traditional authorities became less directly involved in the politics of the modern government, and the new political system began taking on a life of its own. Magistrates, councilmen and other elected officials, who would have once been merely appointees of the chiefs, now vied with others for the popular vote. Since the positions were largely ceremonial and carried little or no salary, however, competition was not very intense. The Congress of Micronesia, which was initiated in 1964, offered the first high-profile, fully salaried political positions, thus introducing a new era to Micronesian politics: that of the professional politician. For the first time politics paid, literally and figuratively; and there was no shortage of aspirants to this elected political office. As political office became a full-time position at other levels of government, election battles heated up.



Meanwhile, the traditional authority system and the modern political system, once closely intertwined, increasingly went their own separate ways. Only in the Marshalls did there remain any significant linkage between the two systems, with traditional chiefs (*iroij*) continuing to be elected to the national congress at will. In FSM and Palau, on the other hand, traditional leaders settled back to handle their customary ceremonial duties, sometimes supplementing their income by going into business. Max Iriarte and Petrus Mailo, traditional leaders from Pohnpei and Chuuk respectively, sat for a short time in the Congress of Micronesia, but that was long ago and there have been no major chiefly figures elected to their national congresses since then.

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Politics are big business today and elections have become free-for-alls. We are far from the days when a candidate in typical island modesty would suggest that people vote for someone else. Indeed, candidates today, supplied with representation funds and job openings, go from home to home to lean on the heads of families to support them and to deliver the vote from their household. But the household head had a much easier time delivering the vote 30 years ago than he would today. Then, heads of households with divided loyalties might simply instruct some of their family to vote for one person and others to vote for another. Today, however, it is far more difficult for the head of the household to deliver the vote or to work out an effective compromise in his own family. Most Micronesians today, because they have bought into the concept of "one person, one vote," are much more reluctant than formerly to let even a senior family member decide how their vote is to be cast.

The result, of course, is deep cleavages within family groups, within villages, within every social unit. Somewhere along the way elections