

*"The citizen can bring our political and governmental institutions back to life, make them responsive and accountable, and keep them honest. No one else can."
~ John Gardner*

*"Yes, it is impossible — therefore, it will take a little longer."
~ Paolo Lugari*

November 18, 2009

Dear people of the Commonwealth,

In the days that have passed since the November 7 election, I have heard from many citizens who are deeply disappointed with the election results. Some have concluded that the people of the CNMI are either not ready for change, or they do not want change. Some of have told me that they are ready to give up on this community, and have asked me whether I am ready to give up as well.

I am writing now to call on all the good people of the Commonwealth to take heart and remember what we have always known: that change is a process. It is often a slow process, and an uphill battle, and there will always be setbacks along this journey. We must expect setbacks, and continue to move forward nevertheless with our eyes set firmly on our vision for a healthier, more just, and more prosperous future.

We must also recognize signs of hope and progress when they occur. There have indeed been significant and positive signs of change – yes, even with this election.

Looking back, we recall that in 2007 slightly over 1,000 people voted for a candidate who didn't run with a political party, didn't promise any political jobs or favors, didn't fundraise or spend a lot of money campaigning, and who talked about the importance of open and honest government to anyone who would listen.

In 2009, over 2,400 people voted for that candidate in an islandwide race for the Senate – not enough to win a Senate seat, but certainly more than enough to show a significant and slowly-growing base of citizens who also want open and honest government. Even more significantly, over two-thirds of the voters throughout the Commonwealth -- more than 7,300 people – voted yes to a more transparent legislature and ratified the Open Government Act popular initiative.

I would call that progress. It might be slower than some of us would like, but it is still progress, and it is worth celebrating. Those 7,300 people who voted yes to the Open Government Act initiative could comprise a powerful voting bloc and a solid base for any movement for good governance in the CNMI.

Looking ahead now, many are asking: What are our next steps?

Our most immediate next step is to participate in the runoff election on November 23, and to encourage our friends, family, and neighbors to do the same. Our duty is to ensure that we are well-informed about the records, platforms, and characters of the two gubernatorial candidates, and that we vote carefully and wisely, with the long-term interests of our community foremost in our minds.

Beyond November 23, and regardless of the runoff election results, we must continue to build a more active citizenry and raise our collective level of civic awareness, beginning with ourselves. Each of us is called to be the change we wish to see in our Commonwealth. I have always believed that one of the most powerful ways to effect change is to lead by the example of our own lives. If we aspire to be a community of great citizens and principled leaders, we must ourselves be great citizens and principled leaders, and we must raise our children to be the same: to be thinkers, to ask questions, to seek their own answers and not simply accept what they are told, and to expect more of themselves, of each other, and of their government. It is up to all of us who desire real, meaningful change in the CNMI to do everything that we can to nurture the core values of citizenship and leadership in our children who are truly the future of this place.

In an open letter dated January 2007, I wrote:

“As citizens, as residents, as taxpayers of the Commonwealth, we have more power than we think – far more power than we have ever exercised. We can do more than just complain in private about the decisions our elected officials make, and wait and hope for change in the next election. Elected officials only have as much power as we give them, and it is up to us to demand the representation we deserve. Protests, rallies, civil disobedience, letters, petitions, lawsuits, intelligent voting, participating in public hearings and legislative sessions, and running for office – these are just a few of the options we have for taking direct action to realize the changes that we want.”

At the time I had named the Save Sugar Dock campaign, the 2006 Micro Games, and the Beautify CNMI! coalition as notable examples of organized community-based action. Since then, concerned citizens and residents have also successfully pushed for the passage of the runoff election initiative, the defeat of the Saipan Casino Act, the creation of the national marine monument, the ratification of the Open Government Act popular initiative, the enactment of the Smoke Free Air Act, the passage of U.S. Public Law 110-229, and greater flexibility in the proposed federal immigration regulations. In just the past two years alone, I have personally witnessed hundreds of residents, including young students, march up to Capitol Hill or to public forums and rallies throughout the CNMI to testify for or against proposed legislation, to call for an independent desk audit of the government, to protest mismanagement of our public utilities, to urge for the protection and wise stewardship of public lands, and to appeal to both federal and local authorities for immigration and labor reform.

More and more, we have been openly discussing the problems of the Commonwealth, identifying constructive solutions, and demanding accountability from our leaders. This is just the beginning of a long-term movement for good governance and a more active and informed citizenry. It transcends any one election, and it is more powerful than all of our politicians combined.

And so to answer the question that I am asked most often these days -- no, I am not packing my bags and giving up on the CNMI. My heart is here. The 2009 election might have closed one door for me as a legislator, but I see other doors that have opened for me as a private citizen and for us as a community. And I personally feel much freer as a citizen to keep doing what I have been doing, and more.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all who have given me the great privilege of serving in the House of Representatives, and who supported my candidacy for the Senate: my deepest thanks for your encouragement, confidence, constructive criticism, questions, and ideas these past two years. My term in the House and campaign for the Senate have given me much valuable insight. I see the continuing failures and shortcomings in our system of government, the progress that has been made, and the long road ahead. And I also see that so much more can be done outside of the legislature, if there are enough caring citizens who are organized and willing to work toward a more transparent, more accountable, and more responsible government.

We will continue to make progress as a community as long as there are still people who love this place who are willing to stick around and keep fighting the good fight. I see no reason to give up now, or ever, on the CNMI, and every reason to continue and expand upon the work that has only just begun.

May we all continue to fight the good fight.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tina Sablan', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Tina Sablan