

# The Congress of Micronesia A Unifying and Modernizing Force<sup>1</sup>

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In the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, the Congress of Micronesia (see Meller, 1969), only four years old, is today bringing a symbolic unity to a region of the earth joined solely by historical happenstance. As a representative of 93,000 peoples spread over an area greater than that of the United States, the Congress has become the interface of Micronesian irritation against American administrative policy and personnel, and its current demand for greater indigenous participation in the setting of policy for the Trust Territory may well eventuate in a decision severing all formal ties of subordination to the United States.

As might be expected each of the metropolitan nations with possessions in the Pacific exported to its island peoples the political institutions and processes with which its administrators were familiar. Thus in Papua-New Guinea (Meller, 1968), the only other remaining trusteeship, the Australians established a parliamentary system when they structured the House of Assembly in 1964, and its procedures have been closely modeled on those observed in Australia. Similarly, the United States exported to its Trust Territory in Micronesia the concepts of government underlying the presidential system, with its separation of powers, checks and balances.

The Secretarial Order establishing the Congress of Micronesia in 1965 did not constitute an institutional innovation literally superimposed upon an unsuspecting population without any regard to its fit, either in terms of preexisting cultural factors favorable to its functioning, or to the American introduction of preparatory political changes leading up to a Territory-wide legislative body. Collegial processes and forms in the Micronesian cultures predated the advent of Western rule. The basic institutions of traditional island government contain the seeds of representation, and use of the council or a less-structured group meeting for consultation and often for the reaching of decisions has been wide spread throughout the area. The literal translation of Olbill era Kelulau, the official name of the Palau District Congress between 1955 and 1963, is "meeting place of whispers," which referred to the highest traditional political council of the region where negotiations were carried on by principals through messages whispered to messengers. In short, limited forms of representation, influence of public opinion in decision-making, and

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a paper presented at a Symposium on the Political Status of Micronesia held at the Center for South Pacific Studies of the University of California, Santa Cruz, on March 27-29, 1969.

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familiarity with group processes derived from traditional councils, all facilitated the adoption and adaptation of the more sophisticated legislative forms of the West which the American administration fostered.

The reference to "legislatures" and "legislative forms of the West" requires a word of explanation. It is principally through the enactment of statutes that the modern legislature has derived its saliency. However, early in their histories institutions now referred to as legislatures in the words of Friedrich (1950), "had little or no concern with legislation." Law-making came later. Indeed, belying the etymology of the name, there is a strong probability that there are no functional requirements for or delimitations to the activities of a legislature. In each political system it performs those functions appropriate to that system as they have evolved by virtue of the legislature's own representative nature and its characteristic group processes—whether it furnishes moneys, grants divorces, conducts wars, chooses executives, molds a nation's opinion, or redresses grievances against the executive. For our purposes, the existence of a representative body, which conducts its affairs through collegial processes to the end of taking group action, is sufficient to identify a "legislature."

In the Trust Territory, district bodies were initially chartered without express law-making powers, thus they were not considered true legislatures. Their assigned role was merely to serve in an advisory capacity to the American administration. In fact, in addition to this inchoate legislating function, the individual members of each district body collectively became not only a source of intelligence to the district administrator, but also a major return conduit for the dissemination of information about the district's administration. Allied to this communication function has been the material contribution which these district legislative bodies have made to the structuring of public opinion. Until they began grappling with district-wide problems, and in turn aided their constituents in looking beyond the boundaries of their village or island, it is difficult to detect the existence of any but a narrowly parochial, public opinion. By virtue of the district legislature, a district identity has emerged from what had been, at best, localized concern. Early, the district bodies undertook to encourage the formation of trading companies, and in their attempt to foster commercial trading, blurred the line between private and public enterprise and thus tied their regions more closely together. Direct involvement in administration and oversight of the district's administrative agencies—this apart from the possession or exercise of law-making powers—also swelled the scope of the district legislative functions, even if not originally intended at the time of their chartering.

The shifting from advisory to full legislating powers occurred so gradually that the assumption of legislating authority by the district bodies is recognizable primarily in retrospect. Technically, this "legally" occurred when the "power of resolution upon any subject" was granted to the Palau Congress by charter in 1955, and to this power was joined the seemingly innocuous clause necessitating the High Commissioner to act upon these resolutions within 180 days, under penalty of their

becoming effective should he fail to do so. Actually, even before the first district bodies convened, it was recognized that in the absence of contravening American directive, their expression of local opinion was likely to carry the weight of legislative decision. Their effective exercise of law-making was really delayed by virtue of Micronesia's pre-contact past, when the indigene lived according to custom, without differentiated institutions modifying, consolidating, interpreting, or punitively enforcing it. The exercise of legislating powers by the district bodies consequently waited upon the comprehension of the Western conceptual underpinnings of law, as distinct from custom applied through a reciprocal set of relationships. Because of this, and not just lateness in the express granting of legislating powers, the district legislatures established by the Americans in the Trust Territory were performing other functions appropriate to their collegial form and representative character before they began enacting laws.

The slow, incremental growth of the various district legislatures may also be attributed to other causes. The Micronesian ignorance of the role and mechanics of legislative bodies modeled on modern lines, indigenous cultural patterns which encourage passivity in group situations and frown on face-to-face confrontations, and the general lack of knowledge concerning the workings of the American-sponsored district government all furnish partial explanations. Absence of control over the expenditure of federally appropriated funds, and the broad area of action preempted by the scope of the Trust Territory Code likewise contributed to discouraging indigenous assumption of direction over district affairs. Now, with nearly two decades of experience with regional legislative bodies, the Micronesians—at least those “acculturated” indigenes living closest to the district centers—show little reluctance to utilize the legislative institution in their endeavors to exercise ever greater powers of self-government.

The introduction of the district legislatures supplied the foundation for the subsequent establishment of a Territory-wide legislature. More immediately, the way for founding the Congress of Micronesia was prepared by a variety of territorial precursors. As early as 1949, the United States reported to the United Nations that the Legislative Advisory Committee, comprised of territorial department heads, was intended to be the nucleus for an independent territory-wide legislature; the original design was to expand the Committee by the addition of Micronesian representatives until the executive members could be discontinued. Simultaneous with these tentative efforts along the model of the English Legislative Council, the Navy also experimented with the use of representative advisory conferences or councils, with the first direct representation of Micronesians in a territory-wide meeting taking place on Guam in September of 1949.

The crucial step leading directly to the creation of a territorial legislature occurred in 1956 with the convening of an inter-district conference of Micronesian leaders, later renamed the “Council of Micronesia.” This Council ultimately became the vehicle for the structuring of its successor Congress. Of course, the Micronesian involvement was but part of the total effort, for forces contributing

to the founding and delineation of the new Congress were at work on the national and international levels as well. Informal discussions between the delegates at that first meeting on Guam in 1956 disclosed a shared determination to work toward setting up a "group representing the whole Territory" and the existence of a consensus among the delegates that it was possible to do so without necessity of a common Micronesian culture.

The process of drawing up the charter for the Congress of Micronesia extended over a period of several years. Micronesians received every encouragement to state their position fully, and the Council of Micronesia debated long over the charter's provisions; nevertheless, in its totality the operation was beyond their capacity. This appraisal of the limits to the Micronesian role does not reduce its importance, for in the final product the ethnocentricity of the Trust Territory emerged triumphant, at least to the extent of adding a second house and thereby safeguarding district identity and slowing down action to protect traditional ways. It is only a reflection on the limitation of man's prescience that the Senate, with its two-man delegation from each of the six districts, proved to be the more radical chamber of the bicameral Congress, and the population-based, 21-membered House of Representatives has served as the cautious brake on change. For the most part, the administering authority tackled the problem of charter drafting warily, appreciating that the developing political self-consciousness within the Trust Territory and the international setting which subjected the stewardship of the United States to periodic scrutiny assured the irreversibility of any power once granted. On the other hand, amendments to the Secretarial Order establishing the Congress could always be made unilaterally by further order should any of its provisions prove too restrictive. Indeed, even before the first Congress met, the first amendments were forthcoming, and the continuance of their issuance gives the impression that the drafting of the Congressional charter is yet in process.

The Congress of Micronesia has now met in four regular July sessions, and just recently, in a winter session following the elections of 1968. Like the district legislatures, in which most of the Congressmen received their apprenticeship training, it has not been particularly distinguished either by the volume of legislation enacted or the degree of direction it has been able to exert by way of administrative oversight of the American-headed territorial administration. Rather, at this stage of its development, the major contribution of the Congress has been integrative, and by virtue of this, probably more far reaching than the sum total of all the individual bills introduced which it might have enacted. This but reiterates the fact that the prominence of law-making by the modern legislature cloaks the fuller scope of its functions and provides no adequate measure of the institution's impact. Just as in numerous subtle ways a district identity has emerged from the founding of the district legislatures and the growth of a district-wide outlook, the same process of promoting Micronesian unity was to be tied with the initiation of an all-Trust-Territory-identity.

The role of the legislature as a vehicle for building political integration is lost

sight of in those countries whose legislatures have long since been merged into a single tapestry of government. In the Trust Territory, whose capacity as a separate polity has yet to be determined, the Congress of Micronesia represents the sole all-Micronesian agency for achieving that purpose. As phrased by Representative Tman at the first session of the Congress: "If we had passed but only one good piece of legislation for the people of Micronesia, we have accomplished something unprecedented in our history." By allowing members from all districts of the Territory to work in consort toward a common end, the Congress has helped to dispel inter-district suspicion, something which the Council of Micronesia never succeeded in accomplishing. The mere presence of the Congress has had a cohesive effect by bringing pointedly to the attention of the Chamorros on Saipan the realization that the people of other districts are not "savages" and that their Saipanese politicians are not necessarily superior to the Carolinian. In personal terms, out of this meeting grew an intimate sense of solidarity. There are individual as well as district differences, that is true, but that is not enough to offset the prevailing feeling of brotherhood. In collective terms, from the Congress there emerged the beginning of a Micronesian "self."

This contribution to the building of Micronesian unity has resulted not alone from action taken by the Congress, but the very existence of the Congress as a symbol of Micronesian popular government. In the first Congress, it was embodied in such legislation as the designation of Micronesian Day, marking the convening of the Congress, and by the first bill to be enacted by the Congress (Public Law 1-1) describing the Trust Territory flag and specifying the manner in which it is to be displayed. The significance of this flag bill emerges when viewed against the backdrop of history, for such unanimous approval would have been inconceivable fifteen years previously. Under the Navy administration, Micronesian objection had been raised to a contest for the design of a Micronesian flag and eventually the project was quietly abandoned. The Marshallese had questioned the value of adopting a territorial flag, adding, "without something greater, something stronger, something that each cultural group looks up to, a mere flag won't unify the peoples of the Trust Territory." Similarly, the first petition received by a United Nations Visiting Mission was from the people of Rota, who protested the use of a Trust Territory flag. Much has transpired in the intervening period, and in the Congress of Micronesia the people of the Trust Territory now find something they could "look up to," a unifying purpose, and the flag was but its manifestation. When the Trust Territory acquired a second DC-4 air-plane at the end of 1965, it was only appropriate that it be named "The Congress of Micronesia," and be welcomed ceremoniously by each district's congressional delegation as it traversed the flight routes across the Territory. When the plane reached the last district headquarters, on Palau, it was met with the singing of the Micronesian national anthem, "*Tis Here We are Pledging.*"

Unlike the experience of parliaments in former British Africa (Stultz, 1968), or the observed performance in 1967 of the average indigenous Member of Papua-

New Guinea's first House of Assembly, the ordinary Congressmen in the United States Trust Territory do not hold to the role of a delegate, only raising "specific problems and grievances of their constituencies" and seldom adequately airing broad questions of public policy. The Congress of Micronesia at its initial session distinguished itself by approaching its task with the purpose of legislating for the Territory as a whole. Very little effort was expended in singling out an administrative district or a local area for Congressional attention. Of the 204 bills, joint resolutions, and single house resolutions sponsored at that session, only ten measures carried reference to named districts or parts of a district in any way pertinent to future governmental action, and of these, two were administration bills applying to Kwajalein. Of course this fraction of special and local legislation was bound to grow, as Congressmen succumbed to the political reality of introducing "pap" bills for home consumption. However, the Congressional emphasis on matters of general concern persists and was demonstrated as late as the 1968 session, the most recent for which full data are as yet available, by the Congressmen foregoing the parochial temptation of earmarking for local capital improvements the \$280,000 of Territorial moneys available for expenditure; instead, they appropriated all of the money to a Territory-wide scholarship fund.

The establishment of the Congress and its attendant elections have encouraged wider political involvement of the Territory's residents and stimulated greater interest in government at district and local levels. Political party activity in the Marianas and the Palau districts reportedly has been spurred to new heights. In the Yap district, the Outer Island effort to instigate the formation of a Yap district-wide legislature stems directly from their people's participation in the first congressional elections, and their chiefs' realization that Outer Island isolation is no longer feasible as the Trust Territory becomes a more closely knit unit. In the Trust Territory, political sophistication normally has been introduced downward, in that the methods and techniques employed in the district government have spilled over to the conduct of municipal government, rather than the reverse. Now it is the procedures of the new Congress which are beginning to shape the operations of the district legislatures.

Along with these institutional changes, and greater political participation of Micronesians through the legislative process, an attitudinal change appears to have occurred in the Territory's political elite, which in simplistic terms may be called "anti-Americanism." It has taken such form as the statement made in 1968 before the Congress by Senator Kabua from the Marshall Islands, who is now President of the reorganized Senate:

With only a few exceptions, Micronesia has been subject to a succession of unskilled, unqualified, inept, disinterested administration personnel, hiding under the protection of the peculiar laws of United States Civil Service, many of them, according to the American themselves, rejects from other government posts; most of them interested only in the money they can save working out here. They have often patronized us to an offensive degree; they have promised us everything for the use of our islands, and they have given us nearly nothing. Our roads, according to American visitors themselves, are the worst in the world. Our hos-

pitals exist only in the district centers, and are in most cases a disgrace. The public educational system given us is so bad as to be tragic. Economic help is nil, resources development nonexistent. Housing, except for American personnel, is on a par with slum conditions. There is no electrification, except around the American houses in the district centers; no water systems except for use of Americans. Many of our outer islands see a field trip no more than a few times a year.

Actually, this has roots stretching back into post World War II Micronesian political history when district legislatures were first organized. At that time the cleavage between "our" (Micronesian) government and the "American" government first emerged, and in one guise or another has continued until this day. At the district level, Micronesians still do not identify with the district administration, this despite the increase of Micronesians holding policy-making administrative posts, and the diminishing relative number of Americans employed. Early recognition of the cleavage lead the High Commissioner to transfer each district treasurer-tax collector from the district legislature, and made him subject to the supervision of the district administrator. In this way, he sought to truncate the development of a "Micronesian" administration under the control of the district legislature which was separate from that under the district administrator. Although legally severed, the divorce was ineffective in terminating the relationship between legislature and treasurer-tax collector, so that the office's situs remains ambiguous. More recently, independent commissions are being set up by district law with administrative powers not subject to the direction of the district administrator and unless prevented by the adverse ruling of the Territory's attorney general, the district legislatures propose to name the members of these boards. With funds now being channeled through the Micronesian legislative bodies to administrative institutions created and staffed by these legislatures, it becomes possible to separate "Micronesian government" from "American government," and to regard the latter ultimately as surplusage. Given the institutional friction, as well as the opportunity for personal vendetta, inherent in the doctrine of separation of powers, disagreement between American executive and Micronesian legislative branches was certain to surface once the district legislator became more conversant with his role, and more skillful in the utilization of his powers. All of this has contributed to the growth of a generalized anti-American attitude as personalized differences (but still associated with pro-American attitudes) are giving way to a suspicion of all American intentions, this despite individual Micronesians maintaining cordial relationships with specific Americans.

Consciously or unconsciously helping to build the syndrome of anti-American suspicion is the Trust Territory's new class of professional politicians fostered by the Congress of Micronesia. The recent necessity for the Congressmen to elect whether to remain in their government employment or to become full-time legislators paid from federal funds, assured the institutionalizing of their separate legislative role. Shortly this process may be replicated at the district level when holding office in more than the legislative branch will be foreclosed to district legislators. It can be anticipated that henceforth the legislator as an elected professional poli-

tician may find it rewarding to question American good faith in his perpetual search for local support and constituency backing, and because of a greater political sophistication he will continue to use various techniques to influence public opinion be they dispatches delivered to the platform committees of the Democratic or Republican Parties of the United States, messages sent to the members of the U. S. Congress or the United Nations, appeals to the governments of Japan or the U.S.S.R. for financial assistance, which are meant to embarrass the United States, speeches delivered before Micronesian service clubs and other organized groups, or less formalized statements made by individual legislators. At the very least, the theme of "Micronesia for the Micronesians" is bound to become the professional legislator's rallying cry. At its extreme, it will contribute to an anti-American paranoia which will have the Congress interpreting all communications and administrative actions as confirmation of American perfidy.

This new sensitivity in Micronesian-American political relations is well illustrated (Richard, 1957) by a recent incident on Palau, when the survey crew of the U.S.S. *Tanner* was accused of occupying property and destroying "crops and other useable trees . . . without first obtaining permission from the owners. They have done the destruction first, and now they are asking for permission which is already too late." Underlying this, of course, was fear that the Navy activity presaged the return of U. S. military forces to Palau. But of immediate relevance, it is significant that the accusation was sent directly to the Congress of Micronesia and there became the basis of strong remonstrations.

Upon examination, the details of the incident assume perspective. Palauan permission for occupancy had been obtained, but allegedly not from the right Palauan chiefs. The current alignment of the two political parties in Palau also enters the picture, with the Liberal Party being strongly anti-American and the seat of its power in good part identified with the area of the old Koror Confederation. In opposition, the Progressive Party is more disposed toward working with the American Administration, and much of its voting strength apparently now rests in what was once the competing Melekeok Confederation. It was Ibedul, Paramount Chief of the former, who made the charges against the Navy survey involvement, while Paramount Chief Reklai personally expressed his satisfaction with the manner in which the charting operation was undertaken and with its benefits to Palau in the field of navigation. Here the roots of a disagreement over the propriety of a specific American act pierced through the veneer of introduced political parties to traditional Palauan cleavages with the titular Paramount chiefs aligned with their respective areas against each other, and with the Congress of Micronesia taking up the issue, it assumed Territory-wide importance.

Chief Hammer DeRoburt, President of the Republic of Nauru, noted in his address to a joint meeting of the Congress of Micronesia in January, 1969, that Nauruans "are in full accord with what I believe was the view of the people of Western Samoa at one time, that even good government is no substitute for self-government." The remark struck a very responsive chord among the political



elite of the Trust Territory, particularly against the backdrop of the Congress once again serving as a forum for mobilizing the nascent nationalism in Micronesia. Talk of independence is heavy medicine, and more and more the professional politicians of Micronesia are being swayed by the rhetoric of full internal self-government, if not complete independence. And it is precisely at this point that the Congress of Micronesia will play the crucial part. In the words of Congressman Salii: "As the only branch of the Trust Territory government which is elected by the people, we have the great responsibility of not only considering the alternatives in recommending courses of action but we must make the decisions. Of course, the final decision will be made by all the people of Micronesia, but in the selection of alternatives, and the program of public education which presents these alternatives to the people, we must play the primary role."

More than two decades ago, John Embree (1946) foresaw accurately that Micronesia faced two fundamental types of problems, one political and the other economic, and that "before any real economic development can take place political questions must be answered." Major economic development in the Trust Territory in part still awaits determination of what is to be the final political status of the Trust Territory; massive private investment cannot run the risk of an uncertain political future, and the politically articulate Micronesian recognizes that massive public investment constitutes a form of seduction which may ultimately bind Micronesia to the United States, and at the very least carries the seed of undermining the Micronesian culture. Embree through his anthropological studies could foresee the importance of the political element, and its need for resolution, but he probably could not have anticipated politics restating those very studies. Today, the young, polemic Micronesian, fired by the rise of the Micronesian myth and bulwarked by the functioning of Micronesian legislative institutions at the district and Trust Territory level, has begun to challenge the anthropological writings of two decades ago, insisting that they demean the capacity of the Micronesians for self-government. Since one of the functions of the state in the novel 1984 was to rewrite history, perhaps the anthropologists who have worked in Micronesia ought to anticipate that their attempts at creating a record of unwritten history may similarly share the same fate. Who knows but that in the service of facilitating Micronesia's political development, the Congress of Micronesia will some day pass laws restating the traditions of ancient Micronesia so as to make the past accord with modern political needs.

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