

Afterthoughts

Philippines : Is Congress Worth Running for ?

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As someone that comes from civil society, I am often asked this question.

I do not blame people for being so cynical. After a year in the institution, I cannot deny that all they have heard about the House of Representatives is true.

Chronic Absenteeism and other Foibles

The problem goes beyond the chronic absenteeism that forces the House leadership, for lack of a quorum, to resort to various subterfuges to conduct a modicum of business. I would say that about 50 per cent of my colleagues are there mainly to get their priority development funds or pork barrel to distribute to their constituencies. This being their sole interest, they are easily manipulated by the Executive which—no matter what the Constitution says—really holds the power of the purse.

There are members of the 14th Congress who, I am told, have never once spoken on the floor in their nine years in the House. And when members do rise to deliver privilege speeches, they usually devote these to attacking enemies in their congressional districts, which is why very few members appear to be paying attention even when a speaker is trying his bombastic best to pound his absent foe to smithereens.

The subject of a privilege speech is sometimes amusing. One member once rose to denounce a local airline for not allowing his aide to check in for him, leading to his being left behind. But while outsiders might have found devoting 45 minutes to this topic absurd, it was not at all to many members. When the congressman finished his tirade, others rose to lambast the same airline for similar experiences that wounded their sense of entitlement.

Saving Grace

Yet I would say that there are some 20 per cent of the 269 members of the 14th Congress whose ken goes beyond local concerns to encompass national and international issues. These 20 per cent are the House's saving grace, for they are the ones that on certain days—not often, it must be admitted—raise the level of debate above that of parochial local concerns and personal and political grudges

Boying Remulla once told me that the institution houses outstanding individuals that would outclass the members of the Senate any day of the week. This may not be far from the truth. Among the people who, in my opinion, represent the best traditions of the House when it comes to discussing and debating national issues, one must include Edcel Lagman and Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel, the co-authors of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Extension Law (Carper) and the Reproductive Health Bill. One can always rely on Caloy Padilla, Edno Josen, Jonathan de la Cruz, and Magi Gunigundo for thoughtful interpellation. The same can be said of the mercurial Teddyboy Locsin, though the latter's tongue sometimes gets the better of him. For impassioned manifestations of

concern on burning issues, one can always count on, among others, Joel Maglunsod, Janet Garin, and Luz Ilagan.

Yet the cast of people who can argue a good case are not only on my side of the fence, that is, on the progressive or liberal side. Pabling Garcia of Cebu is an opponent on the question of land reform, but few can surpass him in his knowledge of the legal history of agrarian reform, and his skilled advocacy of the contra position certainly pushed most of us land reform advocates to sharpen our arguments and make them unassailable in the end, even to Garcia.

The Party-list Factor

Caloy Padilla once asserted that it is the party-list representatives that, with their advocacy based on issues, have transformed the discourse in the House, introducing advocacy of the interests of the marginalized that is both skilled and impassioned. There is a lot of truth to this statement, but it must be qualified. The party list groups are a diverse lot, a significant number of them being simply administration fronts that can be rolled out to deliver a yes vote on issues dear to the heart of Malacanang, like constitutional change. But I would agree with Padilla that the genuine party-list groups have, in fact, contributed significantly to transforming congressional discourse. Of course, one can still hear brazen statements made in plenary such as the complaint of one congressman from the national capital region that, "What else are we allied with the administration for if not to be able to get priority development funds." Such statements of naked interest are, however, rare these days and advancing individual interest must now be couched in terms of promoting the "common interest."

The Nuclear Power Faceoff

Interestingly, the measure that probably took up the most number of hours of plenary debate devoted to a single bill during the House sessions of 2009 was the bill to activate the Bataan nuclear power plant proposed by Mark Cojuangco. What many observers found unique in the debate was its being conducted at such a detailed technical level that members could be forgiven for thinking they had wandered into a graduate school seminar on the pros and cons of nuclear power. Like a number of my colleagues, I found myself opposing Cojuangco on the bill, and over nine hours our duel—complete with powerpoints—ranged from the volcanic and seismic characteristics of the Bataan peninsula to the storage of hazardous waste, the construction of nuclear containment structures, the cost of nuclear power compared to solar, wind, and other renewable energy sources, and the impact of different kinds of energy sources on climate change.

At the end of these exhausting marathon debates, with the clock striking 9 pm, Cojuangco and his opponents would often count only 20 to 25 congressmen remaining on the floor. But that such a "graduate seminar" could take place over several weeks on the floor of the House was a sign of the ongoing transformation of the institution's discourse and culture.

For the most part, conservative interests still rule Congress. Yet change is not absent. Change is most prominent at the level of discourse, and one cannot discount the positive impact a change in discourse has in terms of making the atmosphere more congenial for a substantive program of reform. The pace of change of the institution may strike many as glacial now, but there will be times, I am convinced, when the pace of change, will quicken.

So is Congress worth running for ? Yes, because it is not at all hopeless as a platform for change.

But I could, of course, be wrong.

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