

Star-Bulletin

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A recent "Price of Paradise" radio talk show — moderated by host Randall Roth — featured a discussion between Bob Rees, an instructor of business and American studies at the University of Hawaii and the producer/host of the "Island Issues" television program, and Richard Matsuura, a state senator from Hilo whose special committee has been investigating allegations of government misconduct. They talked about the ouster of James Aki as Senate president, the current chaos under new President Norman Mizuguchi, and shared blatant examples of political punishment and retribution in Hawaii.

ROTH: Dick, Bob wrote a chapter for "The Price of Paradise Vol. II" in which he said it's "comically and painfully clear that something is wrong" with our state Legislature. Is there something wrong?

MATSUURA: I think that there is confusion, there's mistrust. When you see the president being changed, you have the committee chairmen being changed, the public has a right to know: Why are they changing all of these things? And the reason is that they want total control.

ROTH: What do you mean "they"? Who's "they"?

MATSUURA: The control usually stems from the administration. They would like the control in the House, the Senate, and especially the money committees — Finance and Ways and Means — because that's where the action is. There's \$10 billion to be spent in a biennium, so the interest is money.

ROTH: Bob, what's your read on what's going on, especially in the Senate right now?

REES: I share the senator's view when you ask who "they" might be. I attribute it to what I would call an oligarchy that now controls Hawaii. It's a Democratic oligarchy. It's dominated by wealth, by some people behind the scenes whom you never see. But it's a handful of people who are pulling the strings on our Legislature. I think this latest Senate move was retaliation aimed at people like Senator Matsuura, and was conceived by and executed by this oligarchy or machine that works behind the scenes, that wanted to take retribution for anyone who would dare disagree with the machine.

ROTH: Dick, you mention that the governor's administration is behind a lot of this. Is the machine different from the administration?

MATSUURA: Well, I think it somewhat overlaps. Take the example of Sen. Ann Kobayashi. She was chairwoman of Ways and Means. (She) and Sen. Mamoru Yamasaki, who formerly chaired the Ways and Means Committee, they're the ones who supported me and my committee in this investigation. Their efforts got us started and (were) why we were able to get a lot of the documents . . . they're the spearheads. Now, you're going to punish them because they pushed for a very strong procurement bill? Look at Ann Kobayashi. She's not even on the Ways and Means Committee (anymore).

ROTH: But I thought Governor Waihe'e wanted procurement reform . . .

REES: What the governor was trying for was not procurement reform so much as ostensible procurement reform — a very mild new law that would have allowed him, had he been able to get it through in the regular session and then the special session, to get rid of Senator Matsuura's committee investigating procurement. So what he wanted was a law that was not as strict as what the senator and Ann Kobayashi wanted. Senator Kobayashi has told me that the first thing they said to her when they removed her from Ways and Means was that they were doing this because of what she did to them on procurement. It was a direct retaliation.

ROTH: There was also an attempt to strip Sen. Matt

Matsunaga (and his Science, Technology & Economic Development Committee) of some very important functions. Is that related to what we're talking about?

MATSUURA: Yes. In Matt Matsunaga's case, you have a jewel of a legislator. He was moving too strongly to initiate competition in telecommunications in Hawaii. And I think they wanted to give him a signal: Go easy. But there was enough outcry from the public so they had to give it back to him.

ROTH: But it takes a majority of people in the Senate to reorganize. How can that many people be doing something that sounds so wrong?

MATSUURA: This so-called Council of Elders . . . I don't know who coined the term — was principally deciding who's going to be what, and they didn't ask anybody.

ROTH: According to the newspapers, that council was made up of Norman Mizuguchi, Milton Holt and Randy Iwase.

MATSUURA: Yes, they were the three.

ROTH: But they've got to have the support of 12 others at a minimum in order to control things.

MATSUURA: Yes, they need 13 votes and this is where we're having some problems.

ROTH: So it's not completely settled who's going to end up on top?

MATSUURA: Well, I think even the presidency is not settled yet because Senator Aki is correct. He's still the president (without a full Senate vote during the regular session). So we have total confusion at the Senate right now.

ROTH: Bob, are people in Hawaii hesitant to criticize government?

REES: Very much so. Since I've been writing so much, I've received a number of calls from people who've said, "Gee, this is what happened to me," or "This is what happened to my friend." So yes, it does go on a lot. I think unfortunately the government in Hawaii has evolved toward one that inspires fear in the people. They are quite literally afraid of government as opposed to respecting it.

ROTH: Dick, do you agree with that?

MATSUURA: Absolutely. I mean, I've never seen a time in the history in Hawaii where people were so afraid. I get an average of about two or three anonymous calls (a day). They're afraid to identify themselves. And the reason they don't want to identify themselves is they're afraid of retaliation.

ROTH: Give me a specific example — how would somebody retaliate, and who would retaliate?

MATSUURA: I learned of a contract that was being let out that had a lot of gray areas. And you

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Robert Rees



Randall Roth



Richard Matsuura

know, if I had called the contractor, the state agency that was giving out the contract, and said, "Wait a minute now. So-and-so called and told me you guys were doing this," that person who blew the whistle will not get other contracts. He would be black-balled.

REES: The government in Hawaii is so widespread: it has tentacles. And people are very concerned about economic retaliation. You asked for a specific example . . . A few years ago, the Department of Business & Economic Development hired a company called CH2M Hill here in Honolulu to do some environmental work and studies on the economic feasibility of a spaceport. The CH2M Hill study cost \$650,000. The only problem with it was it didn't come across as favorable as DBED had hoped. So what they did was to bury it. Then when they

had to acknowledge that it did exist, they began to say, "Well, it's old and it was based on different premises." The interesting part is when you call CH2M Hill for comment, their reaction is one of absolute fear: "We want to stay out of it." "Please don't quote us," etc. They're operating out of fear, because they know there will come a point when they might have to get some more work from the state, and the state will take retaliation.

MATSUURA: Take my case as another example. Some months back when I was doing all this investigation, a person told me, "Dick, you know they're going to get you." And I said, "Yes, I know," because I pressed the economic button and it lit up the whole state. Take a look at me today. They did get me. But I didn't think they were going to get me this soon. (Laughs.)

ROTH: You're no longer majority head, you're no longer chair of a committee, no longer on Ways and Means. They've pulled everything out from under you.

MATSUURA: Yeah, but you don't see tears in my eyes. You see me still smiling, even though I have six arrows in my back, because my time will come.

ROTH: Dick, you've been around Hawaii politics a long time and yet you've said it's never been this bad. Why do so many people fear retaliation today?

MATSUURA: I think they're afraid because there is a sense of total control. Before, when George Ariyoshi was governor, he never had the Senate under his control. When the governor would come into our caucuses, he would be attacked and criticized from all different directions.

ROTH: They don't do that now?

MATSUURA: I haven't seen that.

ROTH: Bob, why not?

REES: A couple of reasons. One of them, of

course, is that we've had one party in power since 1954, and we've gone through the inevitable process of power corrupting. The other reason is related to it, and that is as this power has corrupted, we've seen a tremendous increase in what you would term the arbitrary use of power. That is, people realize now there are no rules or laws to which they can turn, that the state has tremendous economic power and that it can take retaliation.

Some of the recent statements of the attorney general (on questionable procurement practices) strike fear into people's hearts because they appear to be so arbitrary: "I will not prosecute Ken Kiyabu because it's an old outdated law," and "No one showed me that Mark Odo has done anything." And Norman Okamura's testimony to Senator Matsuura's committee (that Budget Director Yukio Takemoto threatened him if he testified) resulted in, "Well, gee, maybe we'll look into it but we haven't gotten any report." So it appears to people to be almost an arbitrary kind of system in which anyone well-connected with government . . . can do just about anything they want to do.

ROTH: Dick, getting back to your special investigative committee . . . can you tell us what sorts of things might we expect in the (committee) report?

MATSUURA: We will be recommending if prosecution is in order. We will be making that recommendation to the attorney general.

ROTH: Are you about to wrap things up because you're finished with what you wanted to do, or are you running out of money?

MATSUURA: We're running out of money.

ROTH: Who controls that?

MATSUURA: The (new) Senate president . . . but it's more the Legislature itself. I'm bound by the resolution so I can't spend anything more than the \$200,000 allocated. I have to go back to the Senate body to have it increased.

ROTH: Bob, what do you think the impact of Dick's committee has been? Has it made a difference?

REES: It's made a substantial difference in that it offered not just hearsay talk, but testimony and evidence about this oligarchy and the fear that it attempts to inspire in people. Go back to the testimony of Norman Okamura, where he swore under oath that Takemoto had threatened him. I think it was good that it became public, and some of the other testimony that's occurred on GTE Hawaii Tel. I mean, the first step is really for us to learn about ourselves and what's going on.

ROTH: If you had it within your power to change something in Hawaii, what would you change?

REES: We're lacking leadership with a vision. The thing that has to be changed is somehow for all of us to get out from underneath this veil of fear, and to realize the potential we have. People have to realize that it's OK to dissent and stand up for their rights, to abandon this fear that we have.

ROTH: Dick, if the community was more vocal and demanded more from legislators, would that strike fear in their hearts?

MATSUURA: Absolutely. Every legislator worries about two things: getting elected and getting re-elected. That's the name of the game.

ROTH: What would you say to members of the community? What can we do to make Hawaii even better than it is?

MATSUURA: Let the legislators know how they feel, especially those of you who are in the constituency. Call your legislators, and just tell them, like the guy in the movie, "Network."

ROTH: "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

MATSUURA: Just do that!

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