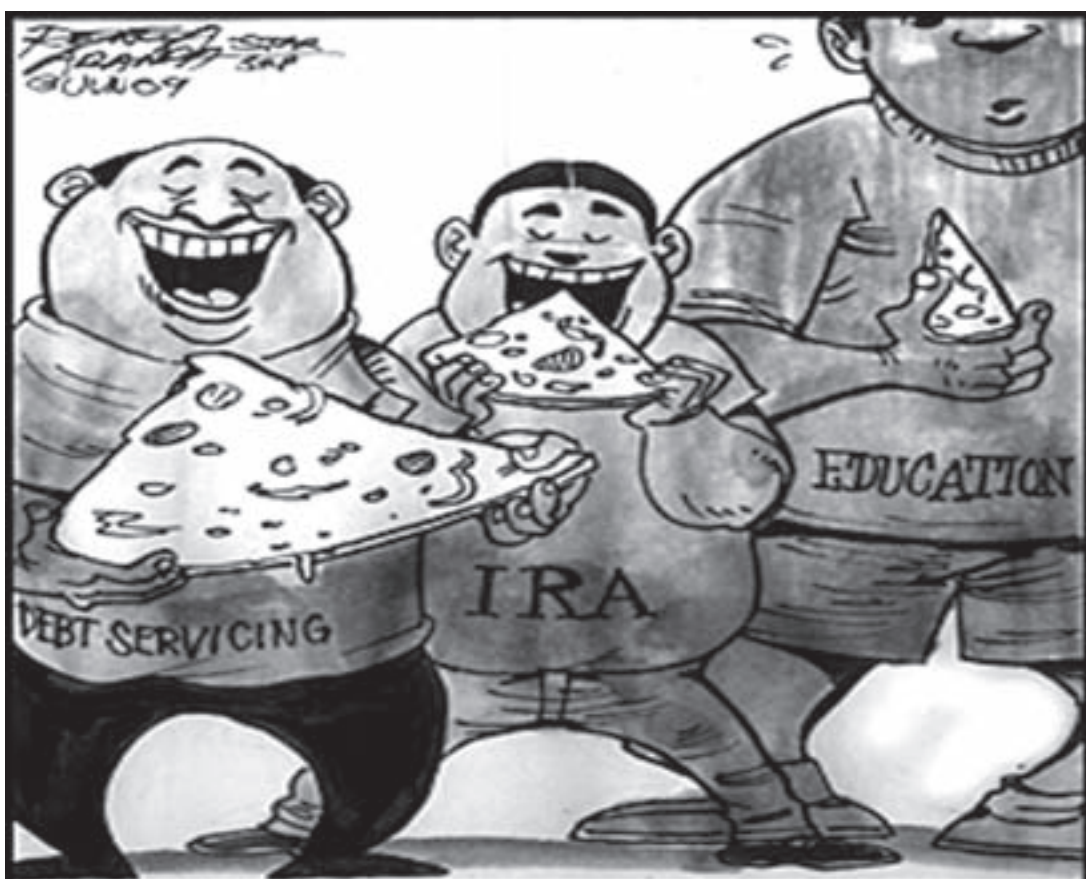


# OPINION & FEATURES



## Budget priorities

**IF legislators can take a break from their main preoccupations—the sex video scandal and the trial of Manuel Villar at the Senate, and Charter change at the House of Representatives—they might want to pay attention to one of the biggest problems bedeviling the nation: the poor quality of education.**

Public schools opened this week with students filing into overcrowded classrooms, with pupils shown in one school even sharing desk chairs. This could be considered an improvement from the days, not too long ago, when classes were conducted in the shade of trees. But even without such scenes, it is clear that there still aren't enough school facilities to accommodate the rapid annual growth in the student population.

Public schools are lacking in everything: teachers, desks, chairs, classrooms, textbooks. The government, with support from the private sector, is rushing the construction of more toilets and sanitation facilities after health experts warned that the lack of potable water in many schools exposed children to health hazards.

Civil service experts have also pointed out that the poor pay for public school teachers has aggravated the deterioration in the quality of Philippine educa-

tion. Qualified teachers are taking better-paying jobs overseas, some of them even as maids, forcing the government to hire educators who lack the qualifications for certain teaching jobs. The problem has also hampered government efforts to promote competence in information and communication technology. Even in schools where computers have been obtained for the use of students, there are few teachers with the necessary ICT competence.

Lawmakers have pointed out that while the Constitution requires the largest allocation in the annual national budget to go to education, in fact the lion's share is automatically appropriated every year to debt servicing. Another automatic appropriation is the share of local governments in the national revenue—the second biggest allocation in the annual budget. With the next budget deliberation starting soon, Congress should take a second look at its priorities. (*Philstar.com*)

### GUEST EDITORIAL

## Breaking through the glass ceiling

IN America, the "glass ceiling" refers to the point considered beyond the reach of immigrants and ethnic minorities such as becoming CEO of a Fortune 500 firm. Breaking through the glass ceiling in various aspects of mainstream American life has been a continuing struggle, particularly for people of color, but modest triumphs have been won and these have led to bigger victories.

The biggest breakthrough was seen recently with the election of the first African-American president of the United States.

From those pre-war years when signs on entrances to public places read, "Absolutely no Filipinos allowed," our people have come a long way in America. Proof of this are the recipients of the annual Filipinas Magazine Achievement Awards organized by the magazine of the same name which I publish and edit. The honorees have ranged from political figures like Governor Ben Cayetano of Hawaii and Hollywood stars like Lou Diamond Philips and Tia Carrere to military brass like Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba and Lt. Gen. Edward Soriano and corporate tycoons like Loida Nicolas-Lewis. In the last congressional elections, Steve Austria of Ohio, son of a Filipino doctor, won a seat in the US Congress. Still beyond the grasp of Fil-Ams is a seat in the US Senate.

It is in this context that events unfolding in Europe is *déjà vu* for us in America. For the rapidly growing Pinoy population on the continent, the glass ceiling still needs to be broken through in many aspects of European life, but a hardy few have been trying.

The most remarkable of these gallant efforts has been that of Gene Alcantara, a journalist and one of the most prominent community leaders of the Filipino-British community in London. In 1998, he ran for a seat in the Westminster Council as a member of the Labour Party. He lost by 200 votes. He ran again in the May 2005 general elections, as an official candidate for the British Parliament of the Veritas Party. Again he failed.

But Alcantara's seemingly Quixotic efforts have begun to raise awareness among the United Kingdom's large ethnic minorities of the need for representation in the government in the face of racial discrimination and scapegoating, not to mention instances

of corruption and official misconduct in the seats of power.

In the forthcoming European Parliamentary elections on June 4, Alcantara will be running once again, this time as an independent candidate for one of the 78 seats allocated to the UK.

Since 1979, the European Union has held elections for seats in the European Parliament whose decisions have a profound impact on legislative initiatives in the 27 member states of the EU.

A look at Alcantara's curriculum vitae reveals that he is no slouch. He comes more than adequately prepared to represent, not only the ethnic minorities in the UK and other EU member states but the British mainstream, as well.

Born in San Pablo, Laguna, he worked in Saudi Arabia before moving to London to pursue Russian studies, following this up with a postgraduate diploma in East-West Trade at the University of Westminster. He then got his MBA from Oxford Brookes University after successfully presenting a thesis on UK, French and German Cultural Diplomacy. He also finished the TUC Employment Law course at the College of North East London in 2005.

Alcantara worked for the British Council for over two decades in various capacities, the last being as head of accounting services and accounts payables with 20 people under him. As a program officer of the British Council, he looked after scholars from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Africa, and as a management consultant, he traveled widely in Asia, South America, East and Southern Africa and the Middle East. In 1999, he was assigned to Poland and operated between Warsaw and Krakow for three and a half years as assistant director and resource manager, promoting British cultural relations in Central and Southern Europe.

Aside from English, Alcantara speaks Russian and some Spanish and Polish and continues to be fluent in Tagalog. In fact, he occasionally does Tagalog news reports for ABS-CBN's Balitang

Europe. He became a naturalized British citizen in 1992.

I first met Gene Alcantara when my wife and I went on the road around Europe in late 2004 to encourage the participation of European Filipinos in the 3rd Global Filipino Networking Convention that was held in Cebu in January 2005. Already well known among Filipino-Britons because of his involvement in community organizations like the Centre for Filipinos, Alcantara had become the *Pinoy* to watch after his almost successful attempt to win a seat in the Westminster council.

Alcantara accepted our invitation to speak at the Cebu convention on behalf of Filipinos in Europe, along with Switzerland-based Anny Misa-Hefti of Babaylan. He delivered a paper on the growing presence of Filipinos in the United Kingdom while Hefti made a presentation on the plight of Filipina workers, mostly domestics, in Europe. Shortly after the convention, Alcantara announced his candidacy for the British Parliament.

I first learned about his current candidacy over a month ago from another *Pinoy*-Brit in London, Peps Villanueva, a colleague in my ad agency days in Manila. According to Villanueva, Alcantara has generated a lot of attention and growing support, not only among fellow Filipinos but also among other minority groups. This is because one of Alcantara's thrusts is fair treatment of illegal immigrants and a path to legalization. Exactly what ethnic minorities are trying to achieve with immigration reform in the US.

Alcantara currently works as an immigration adviser and case worker, a function regulated by the Office of the Immigration Services (OISC), and deals with various immigration issues affecting migrants in the UK and their families. He has dealt with cases involving Filipinos, Thais, Pakistanis, Indians, Turks, Africans and East Europeans.

Alcantara thought he could adequately serve the needs of his clients and the community through his immigration and journalism work, but he soon realized that he would be of greater service and impact if he was in an elected position, to give voice to the many who are not heard. It was for this reason that he decided to throw his hat into the electoral ring again. (*gregmacabenta@hotmail.com*)



**STREET TALK**  
Greg B. Macabenta

## Why Rizal's house turned green

THERE is a brewing controversy in Calamba these days, and fortunately it has nothing to do with sex videos or corruption in government. Residents of this sleepy but traffic-prone Laguna town woke up one morning to see the Rizal Shrine painted a light shade of green. Generations used to the old, dirty gray color, or older folks who imagine all *bahay na bato* to be white reacted negatively. Within days a text brigade began, and some of the irate texts were forwarded to me.

Cultural Center of the Philippines president Emily Abrera and photographer Dulzzi Gutierrez sent me one text from potter Tessy Pettyjohn which began, "Some idiot has painted Rizal's house green!"

I owned up to the deed and texted, "Hi Tessy, this is Ambeth, the idiot who painted Rizal's house green."

Pettyjohn may not have been convinced by my reasons but at least she listened.

Then a descendant of Rizal was brought into the fray. Barbara Gonzales, who is descended from Rizal's sister Maria, was appalled by the color but was objective enough to print in her column the reason for the color change.

In many columns and lectures, I have always pointed out that Filipinos go through life seeing things but rarely noticing them. Rizal is a fine example: He is everywhere—on the one-peso coin, Rizal monuments gaze at all public schools, municipalities, and capitolios all over the archipelago—but have we read his works? Do we know him at all?

Rizal's house in Calamba is not just the place of his birth and early life, it should open our eyes to the agrarian roots of social unrest in the country. While our lawmakers debate the pros and cons of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, while farmers march to Congress to push for the implementation of CARP, we should remember that one of the seeds of Rizal's heroism was that his family was evicted not just from Calamba but from Laguna. Contrary to popular belief, the Rizals did not own land; they were tenants of the Dominican hacienda. They refused to pay increased rent, went to court and lost.

In our imagination, we see Guardia Civil driving them away like the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) does to squatters. Contrary to popular belief, the Rizal house was not burned and razed to the ground. They took what they could and used the materials to build a new home and life in Manila.

The eviction of the Rizal family made Rizal speak out as forcefully and directly in *El filibusterismo*.

Rizal's house in Calamba is not just a tourist spot,

it is a place that should inform, educate and inspire. It should open our eyes to new ways of seeing.

Most negative reactions are understandable. "It should be painted the way Rizal saw it, the way history unfolded it." For most people, Rizal's house should be white and to paint it another color would be like, "dressing a 90-year-old woman in a tube and miniskirt."

Only the Rizalistas were open enough to change and took the new green color to mean that Rizal was an environmentalist.

Let's go into some history. Contrary to popular belief, the present Rizal Shrine is not the original home of the National Hero. It is not covered by the same rigid conservation principles applied to a 19th century house. The present Rizal Shrine is but half a century old, having been reconstructed by Juan Nakpil in the 1950s and funded by donations from schoolchildren. Nakpil based the reconstruction on a faded photograph of the house, and what was left of the original foundation found on the empty lot. The interiors are divided based on floor plans of existing colonial-period houses. The interior is bare because some descendants of Rizal refuse to loan pieces of furniture to the Calamba Shrine and insist that these should stay in Fort Santiago.

Contrary to popular belief not all *bahay-na-bato* were white. Based on archival research, Martin Tinio, formerly of the Intramuros Administra-

tion, suggests that houses had color in Spanish times, but were limited to available paint colors: blue, yellow, red and green. However, during the cholera epidemics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most *bahay-na-bato* were whitewashed with *kalburo* or lime in the belief that this was a disinfectant that would repel the plague. Hence, old houses in living memory are white.

Finally, the reason for painting Rizal's house green highlights and informs visitors of the meaning of his surname. Following the 1849 Claveria decree giving surnames to Filipinos for tax and census purposes, the Rizals who were also known by their other surname Mercado (market) chose "Risal" from the "*Catalogo alfabetico de apellidos*." The word comes from the Spanish "*ricial*" which describes a green field ready for harvest. It was hoped that after asking, "Why is Rizal's house green?" the visitor will get a relevant answer: the green hues are meant to honor the memory of the Rizal family and their way of life.

My only regret is that despite our repeated instructions to find a green the color of *palay* or ripe rice stalk, the NHI historical preservation division didn't take the initiative to have paint mixed specially for the Rizal Shrine and depended on the offensive, commercially available green paint. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the educational purpose of the new coat of paint far outweighs personal preferences. (*Inquirer.net*)



**LOOKING BACK**  
Ambeth Ocampo



**Main Office:**  
1150 Wilshire Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90017-1904  
Tel: (213) 250-9797 • Fax: (213) 481-0854  
e-mail: info@asianjournalinc.com  
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