

OPINION & FEATURES



Ashamed to say

IT IS a measure of the weakness of our collective sense of accountability that when the head of the Bureau of Internal Revenue resigned on Oct. 30 because, as he explained it, "The BIR has a large tax collection shortfall right now, and I feel ashamed to stay," we are all astounded. An official's usual face-saving excuse is to cite medical reasons—as, indeed, the most clueless press secretary in recent memory tried to do, after news broke that Commissioner Sixto Esquivias IV had resigned from the BIR.

Citing the finance secretary, Press Secretary Cerge Remonde told reporters, wrongly, that Esquivias had resigned because of poor health. Esquivias did suffer from elevated blood pressure last week, when it became clear to him that the gap between his agency's collection target and the taxes actually collected had widened into a chasm. But, as he told the Inquirer on Monday, Nov. 2 he resigned because he had done his "best, but apparently it was not enough. Resigning was the honorable thing to do."

"Honor" on the lips of an unpopular administration's chief revenue earner—this truly is a headline-grabbing news event. The revelation is so unexpected we can readily, all too eagerly, call it candor.

Let us assume that Esquivias has served the public interest by being brutally frank. That still won't make him the first casualty of the four-year-old Lateral Attrition Law. The controversial measure mandates that "service officials and employees whose revenue collection falls short of the target by at least seven and a half percent ... with due consideration of all relevant factors affecting the level of collection" would be removed from office.

In the first nine months of the year, the BIR collected P557 billion in taxes, or P39.2 billion short of the agency's nine-month target of P596.2 billion. That's a

shortfall of less than 7 percent, and in a country and under a government that have forgotten the meaning of delicadeza, a less circumspect revenue commissioner could have blustered his way past the attrition law.

And yet it is also not inaccurate to assert that Esquivias' resignation should be understood, in part, as in keeping with the spirit of the law. The motive of the attrition law Esquivias summed up neatly enough: "If someone can do the job better, then why would I stay?"

Part of the problem, for both Esquivias and his successor, is the definition of "better." At a time of severe economic stress, in the wake of two of the most destructive typhoons to hit Lu-

though the net result may be an even bigger budget deficit.

But what if Esquivias was not being completely candid?

This is not the first time he has resigned from the BIR; he was a deputy commissioner when he handed in his first resignation, over policy differences with the BIR chief at that time.

It is entirely conceivable—although he has denied it—that he resigned from the BIR a second time because of more policy differences.

It has been reported that, during a recent budget hearing at the Senate, Esquivias fell afoul of the temperamental Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago. She took him to task for being "so possessive" of the Large Taxpayers Service, the unit in the agency that collects taxes from the biggest companies and the wealthiest individuals.

Unfortunately for our nation's already weak sense of accountability, Santiago was lawyering for her husband, Presidential Adviser for Revenue Enhancement Narciso Santiago Jr., who thinks the premium and lucrative LTS belongs to his office.

Is it possible that, given his behind-target performance, Esquivias thought that the transfer of the large taxpayers unit all but doomed his future in the BIR? He has denied this, quite vigorously, but sources inside the agency say otherwise. If true, then Esquivias should not feel ashamed he had to go. (*Inquirer.net*)

GUEST EDITORIAL

zon in decades, at the beginning of rehabilitation and reconstruction work whose costs can only widen the budget deficit, it is only sound economic policy to review the revenue targets of both the BIR and the Bureau of Customs.

Are targets that assume an increase over last year's collections realistic? The government certainly needs the additional revenue, but do its plans depend on overly optimistic assumptions? These and similar questions must be asked, even

These negativistic, pessimistic and cynical observations have in time become repetitive and almost automatic responses from our countrymen. These are something that the NEF must have strongly noted as they interviewed a sampling of us.

They sounded credible because of the openly negativistic content of local media which the poll surveyors must have conspicuously noticed. That justifies their conclusion of us as not satisfied with our lives.

Masochism: Juliet Michaelson of the Center for Well-Being, NEF, said in answer to our email to her on the matter, "The Philippines life satisfaction score of 5.5 (derived from the results of a Gallup poll) means that it was categorized as red, among roughly the bottom third of countries on this measure."

Need we remind also of our masochistic jokes (which many of us applaud) picturing the wily *Pinoy* who, being "*ma-diskarte*" or "*ma-abilidad*," is able to hoodwink his better-off neighbors?

Intel General Manager Robin Martin once observed "Filipinos (including the press, business people and myself) tend to dwell too much on the negative side, and this affects the perception of foreigners xxx. (This perception) of the Philippines is way disproportionate to reality when compared to places like Columbia, Egypt, Middle East, Africa, etc." He suggests "Let us help our country by balancing the negative with the positive especially when we talk to foreigners xxx." (under-scoring ours)

Worse than crabs: A local TV news network in announcing the NEF survey results blared *RP Poor in 'Life Satisfaction'!* — instead of *Filipinos 14th Happiest in the World* which is the main finding.

Again, a columnist claims that our technicians are going abroad because the local government cannot provide for their employment. Actually, they are in demand not only here but more so in many other countries.

In a gradually globalized community, can one say, for instance, that New Yorkers inclined towards movie-making move to Hollywood in California because New York state cannot provide jobs for them? (*Philstar.com*)

Chosen 14th happiest, Pinoys don't think so

FOLLOWUP: Our *Postscript* last Nov. 3, (*Pinoys abroad treated to distorted TV news*) elicited spirited discussion among readers, so I decided to pursue the subject with this borrowed piece on Filipinos being rated in a survey as the world's 14th happiest people.

Reprinted below in its entirety is a recent article by Daniel Balaoing Valdez.

Happiness index: Filipinos are considered to be the 14th happiest (an improvement from being 17th last year) among 143 nations. This was the conclusion of the New Economics Foundation, a non-governmental entity based in Great Britain on a study it conducted this year.

The study chose Latin American countries (with Vietnam placing 5th) as among the 10 happiest in the world. The foundation based its findings on the 2009 Happy Planet Index which relied on the following factors: (a) higher life expectancy; (b) higher life satisfaction; and (c) lower ecological footprint on the country's share from the total natural resources of the world.

On the list, Malaysia placed 33rd, Thailand 41st, Singapore 49th, South Korea 68th (Koreans are migrating in droves to the Philippines), Japan 75th, Hong Kong 84th, Australia 102nd, and the USA 114th (!).

If one looks at how these advanced countries fared in the study, he will conclude that money cannot buy happiness. It seems that once a country advances materially, the happiness of its citizens dips.

Blessings ignored: Life satisfaction is determined by how residents are truly satisfied with their lives. In rating themselves according to this factor (see par. 2[1] above), Filipinos, according to NEF, fared poorly. Considering their high happiness rating, that is extremely ironic because it means Filipinos do not count their blessings.

A Filipino residing in the US, for instance, relates that "When I broke bread with our compatriots (in America), there was much antipathy to the home country. The Filipino Channel (TFC) was available and the news was always bad xxx — corruption, crime

and poverty. Are there no good Filipinos except those abroad? I visited the Korean and Mexican channels. They spoke well about their country". She asks, "What is wrong with us?". She hopes, "We must begin by loving ourselves...." (See article on *Self-Bashing* by Pat Sto. Tomas in her column *Weighing In*, *Manila Bulletin* online, Aug. 2, 2009).

Not only Filipino director Brillante Mendoza won a major award in the last Cannes Film Festival in France. Another, a relatively obscure actress by the name of Mercedes Cabral, was chosen a la Cinderella as the "most beautiful" among all the participating actresses at the festival! She was voted (through an online poll participated in by professional, yes professional, photographers) from among a bevy of gorgeous beauties like Penelope Cruz, Salma Hayek, Natalie Portman, Madonna, Kate Blanchette, etc.

Surprised? Yes, because you won't even notice Mercedes in our local shopping malls! Only a few, if any, of us would ever think that one in our midst is that attractive to the trained eye!

Ingrained negativism: The results of the NEF survey and our unbelieving reaction to Ms. Cabral's selection strongly prove our low size-up of ourselves as a people.

In fact, if one conducts a survey within an average residential neighborhood, you bet at least 95 percent of the respondents therein will say "*Mahirap ang buhay ngayon*" or "*Nakakahiya tayo*" (things we have continuously heard since childhood). The issue — "Is there hope for the Philippines?" — is much talked about in gatherings and discussions.



POSTSCRIPT
Federico Pascual Jr.

Half-full

I REMEMBER the Oscars awards held early this year. As a result of the recession, the affair scaled down the glam and glitter. In lieu of a regular emcee, the awards had Hugh Jackman singing—and dancing—the introductions. In lieu of film clips showing the nominees for best actor, actress, director, and movie, the awards had previous winners addressing the nominees and lavishing them with praise. In lieu of big productions, the awards had quieter moments, like Queen Latifah singing *I'll Be Seeing You* in memory of those who just passed away.

The result was something more touching, more thoughtful, more memorable. Challenged to do with much less, the people who made it did much more. I remembered this after I read an interesting item from Reuter last week. Market research firm Synovate polled 11,400 people worldwide and found that a fourth of them were actually glad the world economy slumped because it made them realize their priorities in life. Malaysians led the

group. "The credit crunch has been felt," said Synovate, "and it has reinforced the family values of Malaysians, helping them to appreciate what they have rather than continually strive for more."

I belong to that one-fourth, though my reasons have little to do with family values. I too am glad the slump has happened because it forces us to do several things.

First off, it forces us to be creative, the way the Oscars were so this year. Of course, for most of us who grovel in poverty, the experience is not new. The poor have been "creative" for a long time in dealing with want. Look at the habal-habal in the provinces, a motorcycle straddled by wooden planks that manages to ferry a dozen people at one go. That is one hell of a balancing act. That is one hell of desperate creativity.

As for those of us in Metro Manila, maybe the slump can force us to improve public transport. The trains are doing a magnificent job. If they hadn't come along, Edsa and Taft would now be just be one huge parking lot. The sud-

den proliferation of motorcycles and bicycles in Metro Manila by itself already testifies to the hard times. If we can just provide bet-

ter public transport, I wouldn't mind that the private car goes. But then that's probably more a matter of will than of creativity.

I leave others to pitch in. On a broader plane, I'm glad the slump has happened because it forces us to try and get only as much as we need and not as much as we want. You wish you could say that only countries like America are gripped by consumerism and wastefulness, but that's not true. We are too.

If you've been to the US, you'd be astonished by the vastness of the wants, which afflicts Filipinos especially. Not surprisingly because the material abundance is also blithe advertisement of success. It confers status. Which is useful when friends and relations

drop by, or when one visits the home country, armed with plenty. If you've been there, you'd be astonished by huge refrigerators bursting at the seams, and the amount of food that goes to waste.

But that's true as well of us, arguably less spectacularly but with the alarming difference that it is the product of a spectacular divide between rich and poor. I'm always amazed by the comment, particularly from *balikbayans*, that the Philippines isn't really wallowing in want—"hindi naman naghihirap"—because of the frenetic buying in malls and the proliferation of new cars. In fact, it is a sign only of horrendous inequality, a tiny few being able to satisfy wants and a teeming many unable to meet needs. Those malls, for those who have the eyes to see it—and being inured to pain makes for blindness—coexist with makeshift dwelling places along sidewalks, which have sprouted



THERES THE RUB
Conrado de Quiros

of late, prey to the next howling of the wind, rising of the water, and descent of the men with badges, in rising order of predation.

In fact, I find nothing more incongruous, if not obscene, than the sight of slimming centers advertising themselves aggressively (though not unpleasantly with scantily clad wonders of creation endorsing them) and that of emaciated street children begging for alms, advertising themselves as victims of the recent calamities. Enough to make you rethink your sense of deprivation at not having the most recent 55" LED TV.

On a still broader plane, I'm glad the slump has happened because it forces us to wonder about the things that matter in life. It's not just a question of settling for less, or even doing more with less, it's also a question of doing better with other things. If the slump makes us a little less material girls or boys, if it makes us a little more spiritual travelers or seekers, then it's worth its weight in, well, gold.

Call it sour grapes, but not being able to reach the grapes is not a bad position from which to pon-

der things. And the grapes may truly be sour. As consumerist values, they often are. It gets so that having becomes more important than what is gotten. You just have to have the latest Mac, the fastest car, the biggest television set. Pretty soon you get tired of them and want more. The satisfaction is fleeting, the need permanent.

Who knows? Maybe in this hour of need, we may discover books. They're fairly cheap (you can always beg, steal, or borrow, not least from libraries) and they satisfy more deeply than the latest "9 in 1" from Quiapo. Maybe in this hour of need, we may discover the joys of laughter and conversation. They're free, and they lessen high blood pressure more effectively than medicine. Maybe in this hour of need, we may discover those in direr need than we. It's a gift of sight, which has a way of descending upon us as a people, like tongues on fire, during disasters.

Maybe in this hour of want, we may discover abundance. (*Inquirer.net*)

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