

- A different sort of senate was suggested by a Filipino leader of past days before the Filipino people have had any experience in self-government.

MABINI'S IDEA OF A SENATE

If President Marcos is correct in his campaign belief that we can be "great again" — a piece of rhetoric which, incidentally, he has never explained satisfactorily — we should probably look back to the time when we were first great. And that can only be when Filipinos had courage and patriotism and self-sacrifice to spare, (for that is the only greatness that counts) the time of the Philippine Revolution and the Philippine-American War and the decades immediately preceding and following them.

This year's senatorial elections make a good jumping-off point for this kind of perspective. What was the 1898 view of a Philippine Senate? In the "Constitutional Program" drafted by Mabini for the First Philippine Republic there looms a characteristic virtuous and intellectual mood that seems,

in retrospect, passionately a political and contemptuous of most of the values that we now hold to be important. At the same time, it is, oddly enough, not without some similarities to our own view of the exalted position of the Senate, that institution being one of the few which we have managed to keep fairly intact.

To begin with, one must remember that Mabini's constitution was largely original, almost completely underived and uninfluenced by American, British and French documents, and in that sense, indigenous and very much rooted in his times. It was a democratic breakthrough, for an ex-colony, its populism diluted only by the exigencies of the existing state of war. It was also an exposition of aristocracy: talent, "honest work" and patriotic service counted more

than all other considerations. It was meant to instruct as well as reflect and was, perhaps deliberately, more high-toned than many of the people it sought to encompass.

Mabini called the Senate "un cuerpo respetabilisimo", a superlative body, to be composed of persons who had "distinguished themselves by their honesty and their vast knowledge" of art, science and industry and had become the elite of society, not by wealth or by position, but by "talent joined with honest work."

The age requirement was 30 (a point in favor of Governor Aquino of Tarlac who, depending on how you look at it, was born either a few days or 69 years too late). Another requirement was "a fixed income which will ensure a decorous and independent life" (without the need of congressional allowances?). An important after-thought in the same article does away with the specifications in the preceding paragraph: all of them were to be outweighed by the fact of "having rendered great services to the people."

Generals and admirals in active service would automatically be senators. So would "the erector of the central university" (the equivalent of the president of the University of the Philippines) and of the other 'academies,' as the heads of unions composed of professionals (Mabini called them *sindicatos*, a term which may have been derived from the French *syndicat*, and, in that case, trade unions). An encouragement for Secretary of Labor Espinosa? The "directors of welfare agencies that are under the immediate supervision of the central government" (still a good breeding ground for the Senate as the SWA has shown) would also merit seats in the first Philippine Senate.

Industry and commerce, as in our time, would provide a few more senators. These business organizations, specially those devoted to railways and other means of communications (nothing new in the idea of infrastructure, after all?) were to be allowed to choose one member of the Senate "from their midst." The other senators were to be chosen by

"electors appointed by faculties from colleges" (A point in favor of Miss Helena Benítez) by electors from business and industrial firms who paid the most taxes and by the top taxpayers themselves.

The emphasis on taxpaying and "contributores" who were to elect Congress and the Senate in a classic electoral system that recalls ancient Greece or Switzerland and is worlds removed from the banal, small-minded atmosphere of our time was probably Mabini's tribute to the American dictum of "No taxation without representation."

The senators of that time were merely to advise Congress and "the central government" so that "the actions of both may be accompanied

by right and justice" — a real council of elders. They were "to propose to the President the establishment of reforms and of adequate improvements," always giving the advantage to "talent and inventiveness" but their decisions were not to bind the President in any manner, except in the sense that "three decisions made at different times on the same matter" would oblige him to submit them to Congress, "in order that this body may decide whether they are to have the force of law."

Where is the purity of yesterday? But wishful thinking can lead only to the fatal compromises with which, this year, we are all faced. Greatness must indeed be reacquired. — *By Carmen Guerrero Nakpil.*