

A case for a democratic AFN

By Clifford A. Black

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It has been a number of years since we, the Alaska Native populace, have had the privilege of honoring our statewide Native leader with the most basic honor we can bestow upon anyone: our vote.

The present system, whereby the President is selected by the AFN Board of Directors, leaves the overwhelming majority out of the process. Our people have felt a great sense of loss, since the new system was instituted. The activity that caused the greatest interest in our Annual Convention and developed the most personal involvement within the AFN is no longer something in which we all can personally participate. The lessening of support of the AFN and the lack of feeling for its personnel, can most certainly be tied directly to the lack of involvement our people feel. The commentary is written in the hope that the present system will be reviewed during this upcoming Annual Convention. It should be remembered, however, that this commentary casts no shadow across the character of those who have served us as President of AFN, past, or present, I am addressing a bad system, not bad people.

We all have the right to hear those who aspire to lead and work on behalf of our people. It is our right to hear their hopes, and their dreams, and to ask them questions and evaluate their answers. We have a right to appraise their humanitarian and egalitarian characteristics as well as their capabilities in leadership and management. We have a right to vote for the person of our choice, based upon the best information available to us and our individual feelings.

Many villagers have expressed a deep feeling that some regional leaders harbor doubts about the qualifications of our general populace to make a rational decision, in regards to our AFN President. I do not believe that this is true. The regional leaders find our villagers qualified enough to elect them into office, so it stands to reason that they would have sufficient faith to allow our people to elect our statewide leader. However, if there are those who fear the open election process, perhaps we should fear those persons, for it is not in our best interest that the fear has manifested itself. Many believe that a select few fear the open election process, because it would eliminate their ability to select the AFN President through persuasion, or strong-arm tactics. That may be true, and if it is, we may hear from them, and then again, we may not.

Democracy is our most basic freedom maintaining and building tool. We must never allow even the semblance of another system to slip into statewide affairs. Our rights are greater than any individual, or group of individuals. We need to see a new breath of life brought into our statewide body, and it is my deep feeling that individual participation and individual commitment, through the election process, will do much to bring back to AFN true unity and greater strength.

The present AFN Board of Directors are excellent leaders and good people, and the oversight we instituted, having both non-profit and profit corporations on the board, is a giant step in the right direction. I am sure that the selection process used by the AFN Board could continue to produce excellent leaders, as is our current President. However, the present selection process is not a good one. Any process that removes the right of our village people to participate in the election process, is wrong.

Let us honor the President of the Alaska Federation of Natives. Let us all participate in our statewide leader's nomination, evaluation and election. Let us honor our statewide Native leader by bestowing upon him/her our most basic individual commitment — our vote.

If individual rights are again made available to our general populace, I would like to nominate the honorable, capable and personable Morris Thompson, to be our next elected President of the Alaska Federation of Natives.