

Regaining Social and Cultural Integrity

Note: The Tundra Times is reprinting the Alaska Natives Commission Report over the next several months.

In the 1960s, America underwent vast change. The Civil Rights movement came to the forefront of the nation's political agenda, and the country's poorest citizens found relief in President Lyndon Johnson's "War on Poverty."

These two initiatives, conceived and springing forth from a world far distant both geographically and culturally, would impact the lives of Alaska Natives most profoundly.

Having ceded or otherwise lost much of the responsibility for their children's education, local systems of governance (including law enforcement), physical health and social organization to the federal and state governments over the course of several decades, Alaska Natives would now give over to those same foreign interests the responsibility for their basic livelihood.

Famine would become a thing of the past as Food Stamps and financial assistance programs ended hunger. The remnants of what was once Alaska Natives' total dependence on the land would be severed. Because of widespread unemployment, a majority of Natives qualified for programs that addressed the housing and other needs of America's poor. Families living in homes not considered "modern" received prefabricated houses. Electricity, through rural power programs, lit up the villages.

The dependence that began when missionaries came to bring Alaska Natives "salvation" and territorial school teachers came to bring them the "enlightenment" of Western civilization was now complete. The following was stated in the federal 2(c) Report in the mid-1970s:

"Natives' needs were seen through the governments' 'white' eyes. The task was basically one of defining and providing what Natives needed to cope with the rapidly occurring changes. It is more useful than merely romantic today, to keep in mind that the Natives had a long history of self-reliance before contact with the white man and the western world, and that many, if not most, of the newly acquired needs were caused by social and economic changes which were imposed, not sought. Invariably Native needs required resources which Natives did not have and services which they could not provide, thus producing a dependent society and a paternalistic government, the more significant characteristics of which persisted through the early 1960s."

The Alaska Natives Commission found that those same conditions

and circumstances still persist. Though the authors of the 2(c) Report foresaw potential for a reversal of the dependency on the part of Natives and the paternalism of government, such a reversal did not come to pass. Many observers in the 1970s felt that the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (1971), the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1974), and the Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), among others, would begin to change the tide. Within this body of 1970s federal Indian and Alaska Native legislation might lie the means for Alaska Natives to begin regaining measures of economic, social and governmental independence.

In fact, social problems, that began to multiply and intensify inversely with Natives' total loss of self-reliance in the 1960s, have only gotten worse. There is no end of the downward social and economic spiral in sight.

Alaska Natives are still the poorest of Alaska's citizens. Natives' governmental authority and capabilities necessary to bring order and meaning to the social complex is as far away today as it was when Alaska became a state in 1959.

Towards Self-Determination

Alaska Natives must begin to assume true responsibility for the welfare of their families and communities, responsibilities long since lost to state, federal and private agencies. As a matter of overriding policy, the federal and state governments should, as stated previously, assist in the transfer of responsibility.

However well-intended, programs designed by non-Natives and operated by governmental and private agencies for the "benefit" of Alaska Natives have not worked. The evidence is in the statistics that appear throughout the various volumes of this report. Because they have not worked. They represent a financial drain on both the federal government and the State of Alaska. There has been little, if any, return on the billions of dollars that governments have expended over the past 30 years on what has become, quite literally, a growth industry revolving around problems in the Native community. Many, if not most of these programs, really only serve to give the false impression

that something is being done.

The unhealthy dependence Natives have on outside decision makers and service providers is a double-edged sword. By their very nature social service programs and law and order regimes imposed and controlled from without serve to displace the village councils, natural leaders and extended families. Rather than having to face, acknowledge and deal with problems, the community can turn those problems over to someone else. This robs local people of both the obligation and the right to solve problems — a necessary, albeit at times difficult, prerequisite for communal and familial well-being.

The Interrelationship of Issues

Children suffering from chronic diseases brought about by exposure to raw sewage or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, children from families in which one or both parents are absent or abusive, and children who must live in communities where the society in which they live has failed, are ill-equipped to succeed in school, even if school is reformed to accommodate the ways of learning particular to the Native cultures.

The issues confronting Alaska Natives are compounded by their interrelationship. Reversal of the cultural and social decay in which Alaska Natives are enmeshed seems impossible without improvement in their economic condition. Individu-

als who believe themselves doomed to an unending future of economic dependency are in such psychological despair that little energy is left for understanding and valuing their heritage, however rich that culture may be and however vital it may be to sustaining communities.

Improvement in their economic condition seems unlikely without the availability of an education system that works for Alaska Natives. Children and young adults who are deprived of self-respect by a culturally alien school system and then sent into society as functional illiterates without marketable skills cannot improve their economic status.

An education system that works for Alaska Natives seems out of

reach so long as public health problems, family dysfunction, and alcohol and sexual abuse are prevalent. Children suffering from chronic diseases brought about by exposure to raw sewage or Fetal Alco-

hol Syndrome, children from families in which one or both parents are absent or abusive, and children who must live in communities where the society in which they live has failed, are ill-equipped to succeed in school, even if school is reformed

to accommodate the ways of learning particular to the Native cultures.

The collective will required to address these problems seems impossible to attain so long as Alaska Natives live in an atmosphere of cultural and social decay. As elders who know and can teach cultural values, and who have the self-esteem and integrity necessary to provide leadership disappear, there are few to replace them. Younger generations, seemingly condemned to lives of dependency on institutions of an alien culture, have few resources and little incentive to seek and use the tools of empowerment. Without a sense of empowerment, cultural values, and leadership woven through their fabric, communities soon founder in higher and higher seas of economic woes, public health problems, social deterioration and substance abuse.

The answer, however, is not surrender to this multitude of problems, but greater efforts to address all concurrently. Progress in reversing cultural and social erosion will be rewarded by gains in other areas. This, in turn, will bring within reach additional progress in revitalizing Native culture. The forward movement of an empowered Native community, addressing simultaneously the many critical issues before it, will go far in promoting substantive advances in dealing with those issues.