

# NCAI Does Not Represent All—

## Membership Based on Recognized Groups

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Throughout its 29 years of operation, the National Congress on American Indians, the coun-

try's oldest and largest Indian group, has represented many of the country's native people. It has never been able to represent all of them.

It's membership, based on

recognized groups, excludes Indians who are not organized into tribes, recognized associations or villages.

The powerful Navajo people, numbering over 100,000 have refused to join an organization where their representation would not match their population. Their tribal and life structure does not match the NCAI mold.

Membership is expensive. Smaller Indian tribes and groups do not always have the money to join. This has been true for many Alaskan villages.

ASNA executive director Charles Edwardson, Jr. paid \$150 in back dues for his village in order to vote at last week's NCAI convention at Reno. Next year, all 200 Alaskan villages are eligible.

This will give the Alaska delegation over 2,000 chapter votes but it will also mean a great deal

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# NCAI Membership...

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of money. Convention dues alone this year were \$20 per delegate.

"Pyramid Lake: A Symbol of Indian Water Rights" was the theme of the convention. It came in a far behind second compared to the power struggle within.

Wracked by politics, by young Indian groups claiming the organization fundamentally excludes the urban and the poor, the NCAI convention struggled from the 14th through the 20th of November toward a compromise between urban and reservation groups.

It heads into the next year with a new young president, an activist of the new generation.

Leon F. Cook, a 32 year old Red Lake Chippewa from Minneapolis, who recently resigned from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, won the NCAI presidency by a huge majority of votes. His predecessor, Earl Old Person, a Blackfoot, trailed far behind.

Cook is considered an activist. A few years ago a man under 50, from a city, would not have been considered for the post. Differences over policy caused him to resign as deputy director of economic development of the BIA. He told reporters "the intent of the federal government is to destroy the Indian."

A graduate of St. John's University in Minnesota, he worked in social work for several years.

"He can talk to the AIM people," commented one Alaskan delegate.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) an aggressive social action group formed in mid 1968, claims to represent some 140,000 mostly urban Indians through its nearly 30 offices in urban areas and on reservations across the country.

Allied with it on most issues is the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC).

"The structure of the NCAI does not permit the voice of youth, the poor and urban to be heard," commented Gerald Wilkinson, president of the NIYC in

his address to the NCAI convention.

The youth challenged NCAI leadership, mostly reservation based, as irresponsible and stilted. As evidence of the restricted base of the NCAI they pointed out the \$20 registration fee leveled at the beginning of the convention.

"The average Indian is poor. He can't afford that kind of money," said Russell Means, an AIM leader from Cleveland.

The split between urban Indian and reservation, between the Indian tied to the land and the sojourner in the metropolis, threatened to tear apart the NCAI and may still do so despite a compromise resolution.

In many instances, tribes related, urban and reservation groups compete for federal funds.

Many tribes feared that city chapters of large reservation groups could throw power to their home tribe if given NCAI voting power. Members, already registered on their reservation, would be counted twice.

Throughout the convoluted politics of the NCAI convention the 40 person Alaskan delegation stayed together and acted as a "swing vote" on most major questions according to Adam John.

John went to Reno with the proxy belonging to regional vice president Byron Mallott.

Don Wright, President of the Alaska Federation of Natives, was elected new regional vice president for Alaska. The Alaskans put up Willie Hensley as NCAI president and Brenda Itta as Congress secretary. Both lost.

For many Indians, NCAI is a dying organization. The real power, they feel, is with the National Tribal Chiefs, a new reservation based organization.

Meanwhile, Alaskans joined in the highly political NCAI deliberations as an organized delegation, one with the power of 50,000 members, 200 villages and a possible land settlement that would make them the richest of the Indian groups.