

Another view

Editor's Note — This week's editorial is reprinted from the Alaska Advocate. It was written by John Greely, chief political writer for the Advocate. Mr. Greely's article centers around the recent AFN Convention and sheds a new perspective on the goals and objectives of the yearly gathering.

A specter of prejudice and bias in this state dominated much of the talk here last week as the Alaska Federation of Natives gathered for its annual convention. At workshops, formal dinners and informal get-togethers, the chief targets of concern were racism in the news media and the judicial system.

After years of silent discrimination in the media, Alaska Natives have been thrust into the spotlight by the myriad events associated with land claims settlements. The publicity hasn't been completely welcomed, however.

Native resentment to the picture painted of them by white reporters erupted most recently last year in Barrow, where the now infamous "weekend of violence" left many tragedies in its wake, including an image of a town impossibly divided by racial tension. A year later, the news articles generated from that weekend finally got some of the far flung antagonists together for a face-to-face meeting.

Meanwhile Chief Justice Jay Rabinowitz of the State Supreme Court took up an invitation to appear before a huge, convention-ending dinner crowd to discuss an unpalatable state study. Compiled by the Alaska Judicial Council, the findings indicate that Natives receive sentences for some felony crimes that are four times more severe than white offenders get.

"These (findings) really sting," said Rabinowitz, particularly in light of a lengthy list of decisions by the Supremes in recent years favoring self-determination and equal justice in the Bush.

"If there is bias, it's remedial," the chief justice said, because "it seems to be an erratic bias," possibly due to a few trial judges who might have to be "sensitized."

Much the same sort of explanation was offered by reporters and editors in their meeting with AFN delegates and officials of the U.S. Justice Department at a "media relations workshop."

But, most journalists were less certain than Rabinowitz that any problems between their peers and the Native community were immediately "remedial." The only consensus seemed to be that it would help immensely if more reporters traveled more frequently into the villages, and more villagers made their way into more urban newsrooms.

"What I've heard today," said one Justice Department official, "is just an echo of what I've heard in the Lower 48. . . But I don't know where you are now. That's for you to decide."

As it turned out, people concerned with both areas — bias in the news and the courtroom — decided to appoint committees to find solutions. That's hardly original, but then the problems are hardly new themselves.

At least, when he ended his eloquent and sometimes emotional speech, Rabinowitz received a warm response and handshakes from some of his harshest critics. The Tundra Times then presented an annual award named after late founder Howard Rock to a "friend of the paper," Fairbanks newspaper publisher C.W. Snedden.

While that might not be an end, it's a good beginning.