

# Commentary

## To Knowles: Keep your promise . . .

by Paul Swetzof

Governor Knowles was elected governor because of the faith placed in him by Alaska Natives. Based on this faith, Alaska's Aleut, Eskimo and Indian population came out in force to vote for the Governor. The faith we placed in Governor Knowles was based in large part on the Governor's stated commitment to issue an Executive Order, in a timely manner, recognizing the tribal status of all those tribal governments who have been recognized by the United States. The Governor has been in office for almost a year and he has yet to issue the promised Executive Order or indicate he will issue such an order within the foreseeable future. The Governor has not even issued an interim order or proclamation recognizing that tribal governments exist and directing state agencies to work with the tribes whenever possible.

The only action the Governor has taken was to have the Attorney General establish a Governance Task Force within the Department of Law to study the issue. To my knowledge, this task force has limited Native participation and is headed up by the same Attorney General, Bruce Botelho, who participated in opposing state recognition of tribal status while

he was Attorney General under Governor Hickel.

Governor Knowles has served almost twenty five percent of his first term. It's time for him to carry through on his promise to us. On September 19, 1995, I asked the Governor, on a public radio talk show, the status of his promise to issue an Executive Order recognizing the tribes. Unfortunately, the show's host did not allow for follow-up questions. What the Governor did say, or more appropriately did not say, was disturbing.

The Governor, I hope, mistakenly stated there was no Governance Task Force, however, when one is established, it would include village-based Native leaders. He did not indicate when such a task force would be established. I was unable to remind the Governor that he established a Governance Task Force, within the Department of Law, to study the issue of tribal status.

The Governor stated he's decided that the subsistence issue needs to be resolved before the issue of tribal status is resolved because he doesn't want to confuse tribal issues with subsistence. I was unable to remind the Governor that, while running for election and courting the Native vote, he did not link the resolution of

the states subsistence problems with his promise to issue an Executive Order recognizing Alaska's tribal governments. If the Governor is really waiting for the subsistence issue to be resolved, his promised Executive Order on tribal status may *never* come to pass. The Governor must know that the subsistence issue can be looked at separately from the issue of tribal status.

When Native people came out in incredibly large numbers to elect this Governor, we expected to see promises he made, which were and are important to us, to be kept in a timely manner. If the Governor wanted to condition his promises on the resolution of other matters, he should have said so before the election so we could, as voters, make informed decisions about who, if anyone, we wanted to vote for.

I supported the election of Governor Knowles and repeatedly stated so in writing. Is till support my decision to actively support the Governor's election and I still, whenever possible, support the Governor. I must be honest and say my patience is running thin. If I feel like I'm being taken for a ride to nowhere my support will give way to anger at being snookered and my support for the

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current administration will vanish. I think a great many of us feel this way. Many of us are already frustrated at Governor Knowles decision to continue the states active participation in lawsuits opposing everything from subsistence to In-

dian Country to Indian Child Welfare.

We're waiting for results, the keeping of promises, and not excuses. Governor Knowles needs to know the time has come to fulfill those promises he made to Alaska Natives when he was running for election. In consultation with the Native community, he

should in the immediate future issue an Executive Order recognizing the tribal status of all of the tribal governments having a recognized government to government relationship with the United States and keep all of the other promises he made to us before his election. It's payback time.