

View from Behind Governor's Desk

By

GOVERNOR JAY HAMMOND

During Golden Days in Fairbanks, I suffered indignities of which the unwary should be forewarned. I was thrown in jail twice. Upon neither occasion was I first apprised of my rights, nor permitted one phone call. Jailers explained that I would no doubt complete my proposed six month sentence before I could complete the phone call. But, the crowning abuse was when I tried to cop a plea, I was advised some guy in Juneau had told them to knock off plea bargaining.

Speaking of crime and punishment, flogging the Legislature is a popular pastime; it costs nothing; and anyone can play. All one needs is a few unexpended expletives and a low pain threshold for politics; both in long supply these days. I admit I'm tempted to indulge; but that's to be expected for wielding the whip tends to keep one's own hindquarters a moving target.

Republicans lament; I have refrained. On the other hand, Democrats, smarting under the lash, seem to consider even a wrist-slapping by me, flagrant assault.

Unfortunately, no Legislature is likely to be comprised entirely of individuals whose sole concern is the collective public interest. Few legislators can afford to place the State's interests above those of small constituencies. Ironically, our system oftentimes rewards and reelects those who most successfully rip-off the former on behalf of the latter. Short of requiring at least Senate candidates to run statewide, thus giving all voters a crack at them there is little likelihood of change. In fairness, it should be pointed out that some of the best and most experienced legislators in Alaska's history were in the past session. However, few Legislators have been confronted with more complex matters. Consider these issues: a perspective \$600 million budget deficit; pipeline impact; double-digit inflation; the Public Employees Relations Act of 1972

(Collective Bargaining Act); the tax on reserves; dissolution of the State-Operated Schools System; the coastal zone; and a multitude of other items unheard of but four years ago.

Combine built-in deficiencies with a crush of problems; provide no money to shovel them under; and you've the ingredients of a thankless task. Small wonder members indulge in diversionary mischiefs.

Ironically, I suspect had they laid off pot, prostitution, paramutuels, and pay and had gone home in 90 days, many now condemning would instead be complimenting.

Of some 100 Administrative bills, nearly 80 per cent were passed or adopted by code revisions. All Commissioners were confirmed. Most budgetary requests were fulfilled. Since they accommodated most of my requests, I'll leave the lashing to you who "hired" them. They serve at your pleasure. If they gave you none, you have recourse to remedy at the polls. Finally, to fault the Legislature is, of course, to fault ourselves.

While legislative pay prompted most public outcry, it should be in perspective. The "pay bill" did other things as well. It raised salaries of supervisors who are not represented by collective bargaining agencies. Without such adjustments subordinates would earn more than those who supervise.

Actually, the pay was increased about nine per cent per year from salaries last set five years ago. Perhaps annual automatic cost-of-living increases should be accorded all State employees, including legislators. If handled that way, I suspect there would be little hue and cry.

Some argue that of all pay raises, the Legislators' was the most overdue, least inflationary, and less expensive than those granted any other State employee during this same period. It amounts to .2 per cent of the budget while benefits negotiated this year under the Public Employees Relations Act

accounted for 51 times as much expense. (Such costs have almost doubled each year since passage of P.E.R.A.: \$12,273,000 in Fiscal Year 1974; \$38,670,500 more in Fiscal Year 1975; \$59,625,600 more in Fiscal Year 1976. Thus, it now costs a cumulative \$110,569,104 each year. Since under the merit system we cannot freely reduce personnel, annual costs of personal services, now totaling an astronomical \$249,846,100 (up from \$75,732,800 in 1970) will continue to zoom upward unless the Act is repealed.

An initiative to accomplish this in now being circulated. Commendable, numbers of State employees have expressed support for repeal in recognition that such is not in the State's best interests.

The most questionable feature of the "pay bill" is their retirement increase. I think this covers all elected officials, including myself. That warrants criticism. Now legislative retirement is almost as lucrative as the judicial.

Since the bill requires Judiciary for the first time to contribute seven per cent toward retirement, as would the Legislature, it modestly lowers judicial retirement while substantially raising the legislative.

Accordingly, now when asked how I like being Governor, I can say: "I wouldn't trade it for any other job in the world . . . And, with the fat retirement that bill provides me, it looks like I won't have to." Something ought to be done about that.