

More Reflections on AFN Convention

I

On promises made to Alaska Natives

A cynical person might say that the leadership of AFN, anticipating the heated and divisive debate over drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, made sure there was something on the agenda for the tribal and village delegates likely to be skeptical of such a strong pro-development posture. That something might be seen as the repeated invocations of the Alaska Natives Commission Final Report as the blueprint for Native progress into the next century.

A cynic might further suggest that AFN and Native regional corporation leadership made sure its state and federal political allies were singing the same song.

Frankly, we don't care what motives people had for endorsing the tough, comprehensive recommendations of the Alaska Natives Commission at this year's convention. The fact is, some very powerful and influential people, acknowledging however obliquely the grassroots power of Alaska Native communities, went on record

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accepting these recommendations as their guide to making policy. Our job now, the job of all Alaska Natives, is to hold them, with unflinching tenacity, to the letter of their promises, regardless of the spirit with which they were made. If the cynics are right, we must insure that these promises are not simply a rhetorical buy-off, but a commitment to specific action. If the cynics are wrong, our job will entail the somewhat easier task of reminding them of their commitment. Here's what they said:

Gov. Tony Knowles - "I've got a copy of the report right here. Let me tell you again that this will be a roadmap for the Knowles-Ulmer administration. There are lots of reports sitting on the shelf in Juneau—just collecting cobwebs. I promise that there will be no dust on this one."

Sen. Ted Stevens - "I also congratulate you for the Alaska Natives Commission's Final Report. When Congress created the Commission in 1990, it was directed to conduct public hearings and to recommend specific actions to Congress and the State of Alaska that would help assure that Alaska Natives have life opportunities comparable to other Americans. The report is a blueprint for federal and state governments to approach Alaska Native issues in the future."

II

On resolutions

We are not the first to watch the AFN Convention and wonder if there isn't a better way to deal with resolutions. We heard many complaints from participants who feel increasingly disenfranchised by the process. Their frustration was intensified by a statement from this year's parliamentarian. In what was almost an aside to Roy Huhndorf, chair of the resolutions section, he suggested that contrary to popular belief, the AFN board of directors may not be bound by convention resolutions. If this is true, it completely undermines the integrity of the annual meeting and creates a serious credibility problem for AFN. We concur with Huhndorf's reaction, that this warrants some research and clarification. And we would add: Pronto!

If this kink can be addressed to the satisfaction of the AFN membership, we are still left with the limitations of the process itself. To try and cram so many weighty issues into a 2-3 hour period and discuss them with the thoughtfulness they deserve is really a disservice to delegates and the people they come to represent. We'd like to suggest a solution. Since it is commonplace for many Native leaders, organizations and delegates to come to Anchorage for a day or more prior to the official opening of the convention, many of the workshops and informational segments of the annual meeting could be covered by seminars earlier in the week, or written reports. This would make several additional hours available during the official three-day convention for resolutions—the heart and soul of statewide Native policy-making—and the caucuses needed to forge consensus. It would also allow more time for activities such as the powerful *Remembrances* segment as well as additional cultural celebrations during the day to help inspire delegates, release tensions and nurture fellowship and unity.

We also believe greater effort should be made to distribute resolutions earlier in the convention to insure adequate time for review by delegates.