

It's up to individual tribes to make compacting work

by Kadashan

Frustration among Indian tribes across America was expressed at a recent Indian Health Service Self-Governance Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona.

"We need to walk away from this meeting feeling we have done something," Henry Cagey, a Lummi tribal leader, and one of the moderators of the meeting, said. "If we don't get our act together we'll be doing the same thing thirty years from now."

Four years ago I attended a Bureau of Indian Affairs Self-Governance Conference in Washington D.C. where I was introduced to the self-governance concept. My soul stirred when I learned that it was a tribally driven initiative and contained the basic, fundamental principles that all mankind (woman-kind, too) from the beginning of recorded history to now have been striving to achieve: complete sovereignty.

Basically self-governance is the right of Indian Tribal governments to determine for themselves what programs they want to administer in their villages. The IRA Council formulates and adopts a budget and then negotiates funding with the federal government. Tribes should receive funding to administer their programs for the following fiscal year. This differs from 638 Self-Determination contracting in that it does away with the line item practices which have been exercised in the past. It also does away with the nightmare of negotiated Annual

Funding Agreements(AFA's) and their snails pace crawl up the bureaucratic ladder and back down again before funding is disbursed. Under self-governance, funding disbursements would be done in timely matter enabling tribal governments to make payroll and bill paying obligations without deficit spending.

W. Ron Allen, Chairman of Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe identified another reason for self-governance. He said, "The objective of self-governance is to foster self-sufficiency.

This is a cause worth fighting for."

So where is the frustration in this noble cause? The Bureau of Indian Affairs went into a

Demonstration Project in 1990 whereupon seven tribes from various parts of Indian Country participated. Each year seven new tribes entered into the demonstration project. In 1993 it became permanent legislation. Last year twenty-nine new tribes came into the new compact.

The same year, at a spring Self-Governance meeting held in San Diego, California, the Indian Health Service announced it will enter into a Demonstration Project. Middle management people from IHS Headquarters attended the conference. They came with a hip pocket full of instructions and policies from upper management geared to instruct tribes on what tribes needed to do to get into compacting with the Indian Health Service.

Joe DeLaCruz, a tribal leader from the Quinalt Nation interrupted a heated discussion on why the IHS is confused about self-governance. "Self-Governance," he said, "is a tribally driven initiative. The concept came from tribes and tribes were successful in pushing it through Congress from a demonstration project to permanent legislation. You restructure your regulations and policies to comply."

Like the BIA in the onset of self-governance, the IHS is expe-

riencing downsizing and adjustment problems. Like the BIA, IHS is having problems determining the role of the Office of Self-Governance(OSG). The OSG is in

no position in the Department of Interior where it has any clout. In previous tribal working groups a proposal was submitted to Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Department of Interior, suggest-

ing the OSG be elevated from the Assistant Secretary Ada Deer's office into his office. IHS, as we speak, is interviewing final applicants for the Office of Tribal Self-Governance Director, but when the position is filled that person will not have any clout either, even though it shows in the IHS Organizational Chart that it is within the office of the Indian Health Service Director, Michael H. Trujillo. In actuality they have it dangling outside his office with no connection to the agencies under the Director's office. Tribal leaders understand the OTSG as an advocate for tribes, but if it doesn't have clout then the office will be useless. W. Ron Allen observed that "We need to envision what OSG's intent was in the beginning. We need to put it where it will make a difference and it should be adequately staffed with qualified people." It is the opinion of many tribal leaders that Dr. Trujillo is not well versed in the self-governance concept and that it should be placed under Donna E. Shalala,

Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Other frustrations tribal people are expressing are many. Cindy Holmes, Self-Governance Coordinator of the Jamestown, S'Klallam tribe made a significant observation. "The concept of self-governance was lost through the negotiation process," she observed.

Well, I can see that I am not the only one concerned about where the self-governance process is going. When I first got involved I cheered those leaders who initiated the demonstration project. National Tribal leaders like Joe DeLaCruz, W. Ron Allen, G.I. James, Danny Jordon, were, indeed, inspired people. It was they who gave birth to this tribally driven initiative. They, with the consultation of tribal leaders, saw this thing through

from the beginning to now. However it is up to individual tribes across the country to carry this idea of self-sufficiency and self-government forward.

When we do, when we catch a glimpse of this quest for people to be sovereign and how to achieve it, I envision our people setting the pace for the rest of the country. All the mechanisms are there. We need to embrace that vision from our local perspective, and then make it work for us.

Where do we start? Study the Final Report of the Alaska Natives Commission. It tells all and offers solutions.

Editor's Note: Kadashan is Bertrand Adams, a Tlingit teacher, columnist, and author who lives in Yakutat.