

### ***Hear the village voice***

It is becoming more difficult to respond to charges that the statewide Native leadership is failing to truthfully represent their Native village constituents on important issues of the day. The accusation was recently made that the leadership has artificially created the Native subsistence issue in the d-2 affair.

Of course, this charge is erroneous, as the subsistence issue is of vital concern to village people. This charge is an easy one to respond to, and the actions of the leadership may be defended as being proper, and in accordance with the wishes of villagers.

The leadership, and the entire Native population, are vulnerable to criticism on much more basic grounds. It is somewhat dangerous for us to lay this situation out in the open, but it may be more dangerous and disastrous to continue to ignore it. The real, gut-level issue which urgently requires the attention of the entire Alaska Native population is the relationship between the statewide Native leadership and their village constituents.

A number of years ago, the democratic process of selection of the statewide Native leadership by village people was suspended. There were some valid reasons for this situation. Threats to the very existence of the statewide Native institutions, the Alaska Federation of Natives and the Alaska Native Foundation most significantly, led to imposition of a sort of "martial law". Control and direction of these organizations became concentrated in a small handful of men.

The leadership, which has held power now for seven years, is sometimes casually referred to as the "Native Mafia." That is perhaps an unfair characterization. These men are able, talented, intelligent and responsible individuals. They have been sensitive and responsive to village concerns on most issues, including the current d-2 and Native subsistence matters. They have done an admirable job of leadership, for the most part. But, they are not elected by popular, democratic vote of Native villagers.

Suspension of the democratic process may have been necessary, but it is time to return control and direction of the statewide Native organizations to the Alaska Native village people themselves. The AFN is making some good progress in this direction, with provision for village delegates in the upcoming convention in November. But, until direct popular election of the leadership is provided for by villagers, it is difficult to describe our statewide organizations as "tribal organizations" having "elected tribal officials" who carry a mandate and the authority that comes from a democratic selection process.

We must continue to support the leadership in its efforts on such important issues as d-2 and subsistence. We must stand behind the leadership. Yet, we must also strongly encourage them to restore the democratic process and return the power to the people. In consideration of the job they have done for us these several years, we are confident they will receive the mandate they deserve. The organizations will be stronger for this, as the strength of tribal groups has always come from the village people.

The statewide leadership waivers somewhat between two basic areas of responsibility. The Settlement Act construction places the leadership in an uncomfortable position of trying to be an Alaska Native Chamber of Commerce and, at the same time, acting in the capacity of tribal officials. The roles are not always compatible.

Several reasons are given for the long delay in restoring the democratic process. The financial burden of supporting the process is frequently cited. This is a valid concern, but so are the many millions of dollars of Federal Indian moneys which may only be received by legitimate and duly constituted tribal organizations. But the biggest price to pay for this situation is the threat of a loss of trust and confidence of the people in leaders who have not been democratically elected by Native villagers. Failure to begin to immediately provide for this process may ultimately be very costly to us all.

***Thomas Richards, Jr.***