

Potency of Native Politics--

Natives Toying with Idea of Forming Statewide Org.

Part II and Conclusion

By LAEL MORGAN

EYING THE URBAN VOTERS

And there is a valid reason to question the assumption that the native vote will diminish if reapportionment stands, for natives are toying with the idea of forming a statewide political organization and eying urban voters.

Tailors of the federal land claims bill - fearing a strong, statewide coalition of natives divided administration of the settlement into regional corporations with no coordinating agency. They also specified these regions could not use settlement funds to dabble in politics, but nothing under the Constitution precludes the natives from uniting politically as individuals.

Discussion of the subject came up last fall at an informal meeting of a few AFN members who passed the hat on the spot and collected \$200 to start things rolling.

"We're not talking in terms of a native party, exactly," explained a participant who declines to be named until the organization is formal. "What we want to do is encourage talented natives to run for office, help with campaign funding and coordinate native endorsements."

Since that time AFN has been embroiled in an internal political struggle for its own survival, plagued with funding problems, lack of backing from the regional organizations and, more basically, clarification of its duties and powers as a coordinating agency for the regions.

Doomsday groups are predicting it will not survive but regional leaders seem to be in agreement that they need statewide coordination and that they will be able to unite again when they need to, as they did for the claims settlement.

Morris Thompson, an Athabaskan who is a director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for Alaska, believes the people can pick up even more political power in the process.

"What we've got to do is get our people to unite. . . of Anchorage and Fairbanks. We've got to be aggressive. Five years from now, with rapid growth in Anchorage and Fairbanks, we're going to have a large number of people that vote with the Fairbanks. Like the midwest, they are assimilating into the cities."

Rep. Chuck Wicks, an Unalakleet promises to be becoming a lot more active and that will have a big impact on how politics shape up.

Anyone who would study the records of his Northwest Territory this year's state Constitutional Convention. With everything, a strong leadership allied with a young Alaska generation to oust old parties.

Ben Hopson, a leader from Barrow, is a politician as temporary as the call the shots and the party platform to the bush.

"Unless the natives organize politically on a statewide basis we'll never realize the true strength we can exercise in dictating politics and programs," maintains Byron Mallot, Tlingit Indian and Alaska's first native commissioner (Department of Community and Regional Affairs).

In 1970 Mallot and other

leaders attempted to put together a native organization along the lines of COPE, the political arm of the Teamsters, and give endorsement to a Democratic candidate for governor.

"It pointed out that, no matter how unified we are on bread and butter issues, we break down as quickly as any other citizens when it comes to a political issue," he recalls. "But I got so involved if someone had come up with \$4,000 I'd have quit my job and gone with it."

"Not enough people really understand the political process in the state. Many people view native power on specific issues."

"Let's say a village wants a water system. They scream to their Congressional delegation, write letters to the governor. When they get some action they feel pretty good. Miracle of miracles! They get a water system but that's the extent of native power."

"Most of our power, latent forces we have yet to develop. We're kicking it right around right now. But making them understand at a village level is going to take some selling."

Far-thinkers figure that if each Alaskan native kicked in \$30 for a political contribution they would have about \$600,000 for a full time staff and campaign funding.

Plans are now on paper for such an organization and although at the moment leadership is necessarily preoccupied with management of the claims settlement it could become a reality.

Currently John Borbridge, Tlingit leader and head of Sealaska, their regional corporation, is more concerned with local governments than in statewide organization.

Under the federal settlement some native lands must go to municipalities and if the natives have no say in their local government they will lose control of these lands.

"It will be necessary for us to control our community and municipal councils," Borbridge warns. "We must get moving now. Our future assets will be effected. We're being forced to explore ways to become more politically active."

Emil Notti, who was currently waging a strong fight to win the U.S. House seat vacated when Nick Begich was lost on an airplane flight this winter, does not think in terms of a statewide native party or more surprisingly in terms of parties in general.

Although he is chairman of the Alaskan Democratic Party and its chosen candidate in the special election, he believes that the average native voter will not go with the party.

"He's going to go with the man. I joined the party in 1967-68. The Democratic party because it seemed to have less special interests . . . but it's no Utopia."

He feels reapportionment will eventually cut the size of the bush delegation to the legislature and that it will not be easy to get native representatives elected from urban areas.

"It can be done but it's just going to be tougher than blazes! We've got the talent available. Whether we can use it or not is the question."

But he added that his people have a good many experienced young leaders, which must be considered a long term asset for

the natives.

OTHER MINORITY GROUPS WATCH

Other minority groups the Indians and Eskimos of Canada; Hawaiian natives; Australia's downtrodden aborigines; the Ainu, a Caucasian minority in Japan are watching the Alaskan native movement carefully, trying to assess just what has made it work when similar groups such as stateside Indians, have failed to rally any real strength.

Looking back, Willie Hensley will tell you with a smile, the new wave of native leaders he came in with back in 1966 were "very similar to the gathering of demigods in Philadelphia in 1776."

Seriously, he speculates, "I don't think we had anything going for us except the fact we were standing in the way of progress and the fact the government had never legally taken our land."

"I think we all recognized the predicament we were in. The villages more or less agreed and they gave us the latitude to go after the settlement."

He is uncharacteristically dubious about the future of his people at the moment, perhaps because he has just taken over as head of the AFN and is struggling to put it back in a position of power as a coordinating agency for the regions.

"I wish I could be more optimistic. Say in 20-30-40 years I believe our people would be prospering, pulling together, developing leadership, contributing to the state . . ."

"I think we have bought some time and maybe we'll develop to that point. We can protect ourselves for a period of time because of the power of money. It all depends on whether we can make the transition from political power without economic power and still be able to make decisions with some political power and great economic power. If we get more depth in leadership, I think there's a chance."

Notti assesses the Alaskan native's advantage as mainly a move at an opportune moment.

"It was a time in history following right behind the civil rights action of the 50s and 60s, an age of wide communications, when the United States stood to be looked at by the world."

"It professed to be an equal opportunity government. It really couldn't, in view of what was going on elsewhere in the world, treat the Indians any differently. And in my point of view it was a fleeting time. If we didn't get it very quickly the time would have passed."

Whatever combination of elements, Alaskan natives have moved to power with unprecedented speed, and whether or not they continue to gain force, more leaders agree with John Borbridge when he says, "The native vote is simply not going up and grabs any more. I don't think we're ever going to see that happen again. Whoever is going to take a statewide election is going to have to deal with the natives. Nobody can ever take us for granted again."