

Alaska Native Regional Organizations

And the Bureau of Indian Affairs

By JOHN BORBRIDGE, JR.

The unified efforts, over the past several years, of Alaska's Indians, Eskimos and Aleuts have succeeded in appealing to the "national conscience." Our country has decided that justice for the Alaska Natives is the nation's responsibility. Resolution of the long-pending land rights issue is imminent. The Senate-House Conference Committee has already deliberated.

The primary focus has been three-fold, the quantity and quality of land; the amount of compensation and the provisions for self-determination in the administration of the land, resources and compensation.

I emphatically direct the attention of the Alaska Natives to the forthcoming role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the post-land claims settlement. This is the agency that houses both many sincere and dedicated servants and the "safe" Indians who have preferred retirement benefits to placing their careers on the line for and on behalf of their people. It was the latter who were "occupied" when the Alaska Federation of Natives fought to preserve the land freeze during the Hickel nomination hearings. These same "play it safe" self-appointed "Indian leaders within the Bureau of Indian Affairs" have deliberately tried to put Native leader against leader and native organization against native organization. They have opposed native self-determination because it would lessen their influence with the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Senate bill provides for the creation of an Alaska Native Commission which would perform many of the duties ordinarily performed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs relative to the enrollment and other activities. The House bill provides that these duties shall be performed

by the Department of Interior Bureau of Indian Affairs, thus obviating the necessity for the Native Commission. It appears that Chairman Aspinall's views will prevail. As a consequence, we can anticipate that the Bureau of Indian Affairs will need to expand to perform some of the functions required under claims legislation. Equally obvious is the vested interest held by some of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' employees who envision expanded office operations and promotions. The temptation to them to influence, directly or indirectly, the decision-making process and to interfere with internal native politics will be almost irresistible. After all—some of these "safe" Indians have never developed an innovative program to meet the needs of the people they serve. They have even forgotten that their role is to serve—not to meddle. They are much better suited to being professional apologists for what the Bureau of Indian Affairs has failed to do during their tenure.

The Central council of the Tlingit and Haida Indians of Alaska took President Nixon's message on Indian affairs literally and sought to implement its inspiring and visionary doctrine of self-determination. The high-level commitment was inspiring — Commissioner Bruce and his activist staff proved to be outstanding in this regard.

However, because of the utter failure of the area office and southeast superintendent to effectively cooperate, the Central Council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs' central office moved the negotiations to Washington, D.C.

The contract for the complete assumption of responsibility for the entire Southeast Bureau of Indian Affairs' functions and operations by the Central Council was signed. The "take-over contract" is one of three such contracts in the United States.

It was signed despite the opposition of the southeast agency superintendent who sought to block or slow down the negotiations by actively seeking help from a U.S. Senator and the Human Rights Commission. His attitude never changed. After opposing this basic contract and after seeking to undermine the authority of the Central Council to enter into such a contract, he was promoted to sit at the present area director's right hand. Exactly where does this put the area director who SAYS he is for contracting while producing little in the way of tangible results.

How many Native organizations have Bureau of Indian Affairs' contracts in Alaska today? Why is the one person opposed to takeover contracts by Native organizations now a high level advisor to the area director? He was not, to my knowledge, endorsed by the Native organizations—despite the Bureau of Indian Affairs' invitation to recommend candidates.

CONCLUSIONS

1. If the Role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs expands and a Native Commission is not established — the Area Director should NOT appoint anyone objectionable to the Native regional organization either in a liaison capacity or as the admini-

strator of an operation. No regional wants a "safe Indian" who will meddle in internal politics behind the shield of civil service status.

2. The Area Director must make a commitment and be more vigorous in advancing his policies and beliefs—whatever they are. His one appointment leads me to at least question his commitment to Native contracts. The Central Council has been negotiating for the renewal of its contract to administer the southeast Bureau of Indian Affairs' operation since May! Neither Chairman Wayne Aspinall nor the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee expressed ANY reservations about the Council's contract and operations. They were complimentary. Never mind Washington, D.C., where does the Area Director stand?

3. The Bureau of Indian Affairs lacks a firm advocate for the Native people within its structure. Why? This role was assumed by the Native Affairs Officer in Public Health Service. Why doesn't the Bureau of Indian Affairs require this of one of its many administrators—tribal operations, for example. Few Native leaders know what that office is supposed to accomplish and there is no indication of any innovative approaches under the incumbent. The same was true under this predecessor.

4. The Bureau of Indian Affairs is laying the groundwork for the relations that will prevail with the Natives when the regional organizations are formally created. Its ONLY HOPE for the future for an innovative, creative and dedicated approach to meeting the needs of our people will be through contraction. Without this effort the Bureau of Indian Affairs will be hopelessly enmeshed in its own record of general failure.

5. Bureau of Indian Affairs employees in a liaison or administrative capacity following passage of claims legislation must maintain a "low profile." This is not a Bureau of Indian Affairs' land claims. The Bureau of Indian Affairs should seek to sub-contract with Native organizations for some of the post-settlement tasks.

6. I emphasize my respect and appreciation for the great majority of Bureau of Indian Affairs' employees. Most of these have been most cooperative.

7. The Bureau of Indian Affairs have policy-makers who deliberately try to influence the Bureau of Indian Affairs to contract with organizations within which they also sit as Native elected policy-makers. What do you intend to do Mr. Thompson?

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