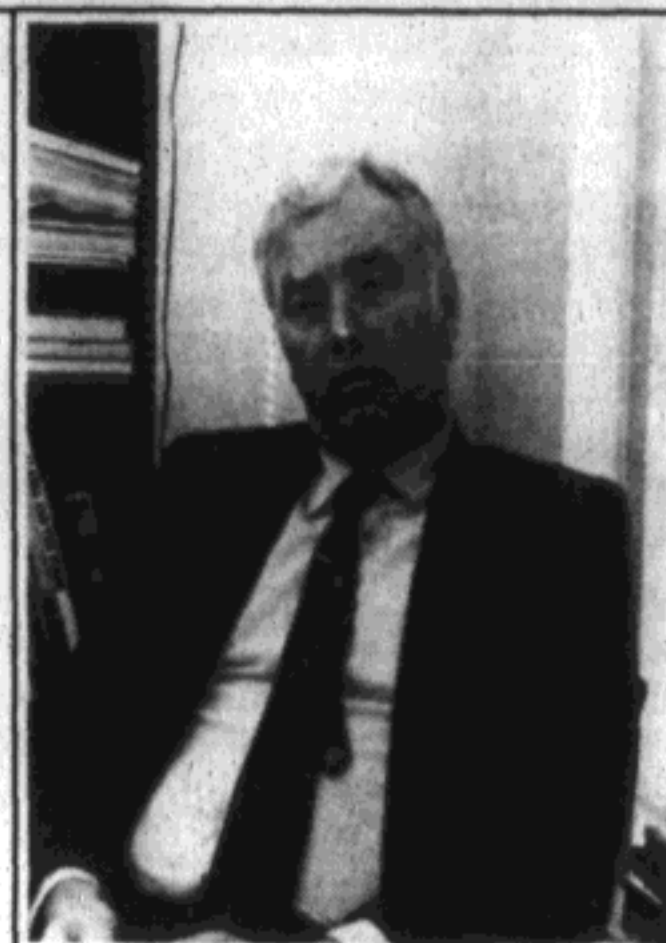
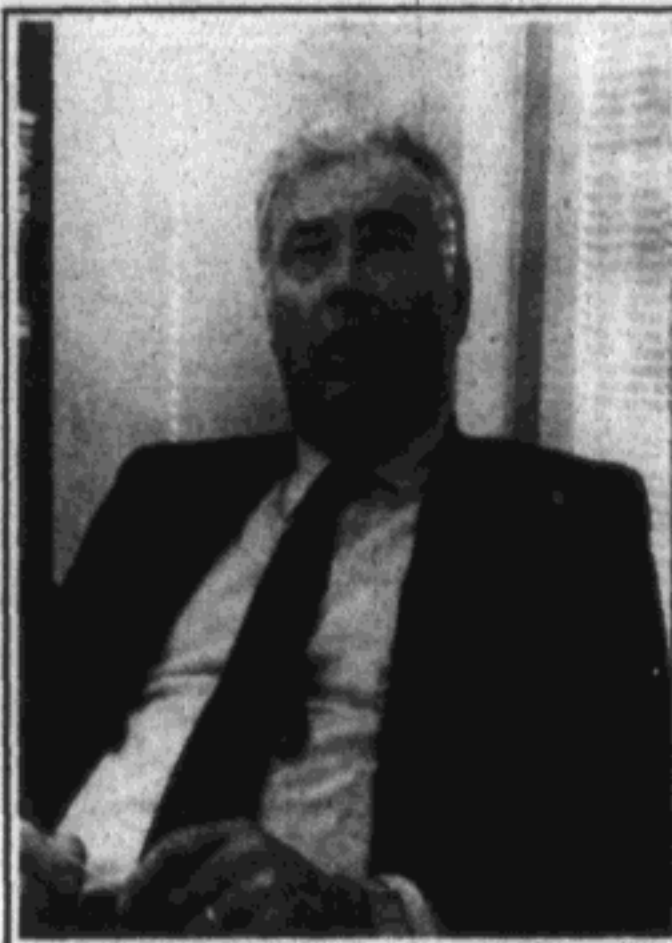


Interview with U.S. Senator Frank Murkowski



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Interview by Jim Benedetto, Tundra Times Editor

Tundra Times: *Senator, this question concerns the 1991 legislation which was introduced jointly in the Senate and the House of Representatives last week. Do you anticipate any changes that might take place in the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources (of which the Senator is a member), where the bill has been referred?*

Sen. Murkowski: Well, as a result of the hearing process, that's always possible. That's the whole point of the hearings: to get the input from the Alaska Native community on what they think of the legislation.

I conducted one hearing in Hoonah the day before yesterday, and there were a couple hundred people there. I was pleased at the attendance. We had six panels and probably had, oh, 28 or so witnesses. Most of the witnesses were in support of the AFN's... seven or eight resolutions... pretty much along the lines of the AF-of-N's position.

One of the witnesses spoke of his desire to see that after-borns (or 'new Natives', i.e., those born after 1971) were taken care of, and we got into a general discussion of the mechanics of that...

There was some discussion about the interest of some of the Elders, who by prolonging 1991 (i.e., postponing stock alienability) would not get the utilization of their stock in the sense of being able to borrow against it or trade it or sell it, that they would had 1991 been a reality, but

there was no strong feeling, just a statement of fact...

I would say (there was) substantial support for the position of the AF-of-N, no mention of sovereignty.

Tundra Times: *Can you give our readers any indication of when the bill might reach the floor of the Senate?*

Sen. Murkowski: Not with any degree of accuracy. We've got hearings in March, Ted (Stevens) is going to take part of those hearings... I'm told by what I read in the paper that some of the western Alaska people intend to come back to Washington and lobby...

Tundra Times: *They're there now. Have you seen any of the alternative legislation that the Yupiit Nation has prepared?*

Sen. Murkowski: I'm sure my staff has seen some, but...

Murkowski staffer: It's there, but we haven't had a chance to...

Sen. Murkowski: I might address that a little bit. My position is that if we have a clean bill, I don't think there's going to be any objection, because it's a Native affair; it's basically an expression of the will of the people who are the recipients to simply extend the time. And I don't see it as an issue that is highly debateable.

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Murkowski Interview

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But if we get a situation back there — and I've seen it time and time again in committee — where, the first question comes up: 'well, is this what the people want?' You say, 'Yes', and then somebody says 'Just a minute, I've got letters here, and information that the people want something else' and that's when the process breaks down, and that could happen. And the issue of sovereignty is so divisional in the sense of Native and non-Native perception... if we get into that, and somebody seriously wants to carry it, that could kill the whole thing. As I say, I don't know whether we're going to get into it, but it's not the position of AF-of-N. They can always look around and find somebody to carry that ball; it's highly emotional and highly politicized. I assume they'd go to Howard Metzenbaum or somebody and see if he's interested.

Tundra Times: *You have been one of the most active recently in calling for cultural exchange between Alaska Natives and Soviet Natives; you've already suggested that the Soviet Natives be invited to participate in the World Eskimo-Indian Olympics. Are there any other projects that you're aware of, or ideas that you have for cultural exchange?*

Sen. Murkowski: Well, there's an effort to try to get some tourist exchange with the Soviet sub-Arctic. They're talking about trying to get the next summit meeting here... with Gorbachev and the president. We made an inquiry yesterday, and what'd they say, 'Cool it'?

The sensitivity (that the Soviets have) is one that I wasn't aware of, but it is by design that the cultural exchanges that are proposed by the Soviets are primarily through the eastern door of the Soviet Union through Europe. There is a reluctance to open up this end across from Alaska, because, a couple of things: the standard of living is much lower among the aboriginal people, and they're concerned that an exchange will create jealousy and so forth. And then they have a security sensitivity over there, based on some of their training and missiles in some areas. I think they're a little embarrassed of the standard of living, not just among the Eskimo, but residents of sub-Arctic Siberian coast, and for that reason they're reluctant to open it up to tourists or to cultural exchange. That's not an official statement, but there's probably more truth to it than anything else. We may not get quite as much reaction as we had hoped.

Tundra Times: *There is another group, the Alaska Performing Artists For Peace—*

Sen. Murkowski: Dixie Belcher's group. I've met her down in Juneau.

Tundra Times: *They plan to bring a group of performing artists to Moscow and Siberia, among them several Eskimo dance groups, author James Michener and former Alaska Governor Jay Hammond.*

Murkowski staffer: The man who's in charge of the exchange program was saying he's got over 400 proposals for different types of cultural exchanges. The encouraging thing is that the Native cultural exchanges are some of the ones at the top of the list.

Tundra Times: *What is the possibility of the export of North Slope oil in the near future?*

Sen. Murkowski: The Export Administration Act... is coming down with their study... We're satisfied that it's a well put together, well thought out, and we'll be pretty candid that it will be meaningful because it will represent a formal analysis of the pros and cons. It would seem to me that with the declining oil price that it's much more advantageous to consider. Still, the special interest groups are going to oppose it all the way.

Tundra Times: *Gramm-Rudman-Hollings. People are screaming that Gramm-Rudman will have a disastrous effect, in addition to the already monstrous cuts in the Reagan Administration's FY'87 budget, on the social programs for Native people in Alaska. You and Senator Stevens, as well as Congressman Young, have already said that you intend to fight to restore funding to those social programs, but what are the prospects of that happening?*

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Murkowski Interview

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Sen. Murkowski: Well, you know, Johnson O'Malley has been up every time (for elimination by the Reagan Administration), we've managed to get it back in, just to give you some idea. Gramm-Rudman sounds like something other than what it is, and really it's nothing more than a balanced budget dictate...our state is one of 37 states that have passed that legislation. We've not been able to get a balanced budget resolution through Congress, but we did get Gramm-Rudman, which simply says that over five years you will achieve a balanced budget by 1991 by making reduction in the rate of growth of the deficit until you achieve it...

So what you've got is a basic legislative discipline now that we previously didn't have. The reason that a lot of us think it's mandatory, is that if it's not checked now, by 1990, 41 cents out of every taxpayer's dollar will go for interest on the debt, and all it's doing is mortgaging the future.

Tundra Times: *Are you in favor of either raising taxes or perhaps an oil import tax?*

Sen. Murkowski: I don't think that raising taxes is the solution because you're just taking it away from the savings and the available funding that if you leave it in the private sector, it will be invested, it will be saved, it will expand jobs; and if the government takes more, it means that there's that much less to fuel the economy. There's no magic to a situation like that, you either increase revenues or you decrease expenses. I think we've got to go through and reprioritize the services government offers.

Tundra Times: *What about the statement in the '87 budget that says that 'given the improvement in Native economic status due to ANCSA, the absence of land holdings that the U.S. has statutory responsibility to manage and the absence of any treaty rights to be protected, the Administration believes that Alaska Natives no longer require the level of financial support that the federal government provided in the past.'?*

Sen. Murkowski: One of the areas that we have attempted to prioritize in this delegation has been the funding for the transfer of the lands... it's been a fight each time, but we've been able to do it... because we've maintained that it's a contractual relationship... same kind of thing's going to happen this time, we're going to win a few and lose a few..

Tundra Times: *Is this simply an excuse for the Administration to cut the budget, or is this 'ANCSA prosperity' a serious perception of the Reagan Administration? If so, it may bode ill for the 1991 package. After all, why should Congress or the Administration endorse changes to ANCSA if they already have the perception that Alaska Natives are prospering because of it?*

Sen. Murkowski: I think when you use the words 'prospering' or the 'perception of prospering' you have to put it into some context compared to what. Compared to how the Alaska Natives were 25 years ago? Ten years ago? I honestly don't know. Most of the people that come up with these positions relative to something that has been cleared by OMB (Office of Management and Budget), they have little contact with the realities. They're looking for

budget cuts — and they're looking for budget cuts anywhere, it doesn't make any difference where it is — they justify them as best they can. That's really nothing new. The perception of people in the Department of the Interior or in Washington is fraught with all types of inaccuracies; they don't really know...

Tundra Times: *What is the present status of the North Pacific Fur Seal Treaty?*

Sen. Murkowski: We're still fighting the Humane Society... First they agreed, then they came back and said they objected to any commercialization... but I said that's ridiculous. There has been a historical use by the people, there's not much in the way of resources out there, it provides a little segment for their livelihood, they should be allowed to do whatever they want with the remains. The point is that if you give 15,000 seals for subsistence, that means you've got 15,000 dead seals! Let 'em do what they want with them. I'm holding tough. I maintain that we still have a treaty, and some of the people say that we don't have a treaty. I say we have a treaty until it's cancelled, and it hasn't been cancelled.