



PRIEST SPEAKS OUT FOR HIS PEOPLE—Father Michael Lestenkov, a Pribilofian of St. George, now priest of the Russian Orthodox Church at St. Paul, spoke out at a public meeting before a five-member Pribilof Commission last week. Father Lestenkov and the Rev. Deacon Smile V. Gromoff, each received applause for their presentations by the audience. In a tape recorded interview after the meeting, the priest said the dispute between the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries and the Church over land was by no means settled as claimed by Pribilof Director Howard Baltzo last December in Juneau. —Tundra Times Photo by Snapp

Senator Bartlett Introduces Bill Providing Major Reforms in State's Pribilof Islands

Alaska's Sen. E. L. (Bob) Bartlett has introduced a bill into the U.S. Senate to ensure residents of the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea full rights of citizenship.

Sen. Bartlett, in a speech on the Senate floor on introducing the bill, also commended Tundra Times Editor and Publisher Howard Rock for his work in exposing conditions on the Pribilofs in a series of articles in the Tundra Times last winter.

The islands were part of the Alaska purchase, and are under control of the Secretary of the Interior. The 642 Pribilofians are the descendants of Aleuts brought to the islands by the Russians in the early 19th Century to harvest fur seals.

Sen. Bartlett pointed out that under Russian rule the islanders were not paid for their labor. "They worked in a state close to bondage, receiving food, clothing, and housing from the government."

The U.S. inherited the same system of "maintaining the natives, which continued without substantial change until 1950, when the first wage system went into effect.

However, with the exception of the two Russian Orthodox Churches there, deeded in the treaty of cession, there is no private ownership on the islands.

Bartlett's bill would permit the transfer of land, houses, and property to private ownership. It would permit the State of Alaska to assume responsibility for conducting public schools.

A regulation making a pass necessary to visit the islands would be eliminated, and another provision would give the natives civil service retirement for their entire length of service rather than just from 1950.

"The bill which I introduce today is designed to allow the Pribilofians

to stand on their own two feet and obtain for them the protection and rights enjoyed by all American citizens," Bartlett said in his speech on the Senate floor.

"Interest in the status of the Pribilofians is not new. All my life I have heard accounts of their problems. All my life, I have heard, too, the official reassurances that Pribilofians are being fairly treated. And yet the problems continue.

"The bill which I introduce today, should it become law, will insure once and for all equality of treatment for the Pribilofians.

"I cannot introduce this bill without paying tribute to three persons with whom I have worked closely on its preparation," Bartlett said in his speech.

"First, to Howard Rock, publisher and editor of the Tundra Times, who, in a series of articles this winter, made clear to all who read them that the time had come to see that full justice was done on the islands.

"Second to Willard Bowman, executive director of the Alaska State Commission for Human Rights, who, at my suggestion and at the instruction of Gov. William A. Egan, undertook a study of conditions on the islands.

Thirdly, to Donald McKernan, Director, Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, who has given me his full and continuing cooperation in the preparation of this legislation."

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Bartlett Pribilof Reform Bill . . .

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Sen. Bartlett said he did not have the slightest doubt that the federal agencies involved were anxious to see that the welfare of the pribilovians were served.

"The bill which I introduce is a long one. It provides the Secretary of the Interior the authority he needs to see that the following reforms are carried out:

"Since 1950, wages have been paid and civil service retirement benefits have been calculated accordingly. This bill will allow the inclusion of services performed before 1950 in the computation of these benefits.

"There is now no native ownership on the islands. There are but two exceptions: The Russian Orthodox Church on St. Paul and the Russian Orthodox Church on St. George. These two churches were built during the days of Russian ownership and were deeded, by the treaty of cession, to their respective congregations.

"The bill which I introduce provides for the transfer of title to lands, houses and property from the government to the citizens. A fair compensation is provided for.

"For many years no person could visit the islands without first receiving a pass to do so from the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries. Until quite recently, this pass could only be obtained in Seattle. Now, at least, it can be obtained on the islands itself.

"My bill abolishes this odious pass system in its entirety," Bartlett stated.

"The bill which I introduce today provides for the development and strengthening of incorporated local government. It provides that educational facilities shall be operated by the State of Alaska and that standards shall be maintained equal to that of the Alaska education system.

"The bill provides that the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries may turn over its health and welfare responsibilities as well.

"It should be made clear that the bill authorizes the Secretary to do all these things but it does not require him to do so immediately upon enactment. These things take

time and it is necessary to insure that the interests of the Pribilovians are assured throughout the transfer of responsibilities.

"No doubt this bill can be improved. No doubt it will be improved as hearings are held and comments are received from the agencies, the State Government and the Pribilovians themselves.

"It is, however, a beginning, an important and significant beginning. And it makes clear that good intentions and the firm determination of everyone concerned to see that equal rights for all applies to the Pribilovians as well as to all other Americans."

The bill has two principal titles: Title I gives legal expression to the terms of the Fur Seal Convention ratified by the Congress on Thursday, January 30, 1964.

The North Pacific Fur Seal Convention has been in effect since 1911. It is an agreement with Canada, Japan, Russia and the United States participating which governs the conservation and utilization of the immensely valuable and unique fur seal resources of the North Pacific.

This is important, but even more important is Title II which deals with the administration of the islands. This is designed to bring to the people of the Pribilof Islands—at this late date—the full benefits, rights, duties and responsibilities which are theirs as citizens of Alaska and citizens of the United States.