

# Hensley: Subsistence, Spirit Movement linked



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By GEORGE GARDNER

Tundra Times

For the past few weeks much media coverage has been devoted to Willie Hensley, prominent Native leader, businessman and politician. Many newspapers have carried stories about rumors that Hensley would bolt the Democratic Party and run for Lt. Governor with former Governor Wally Hickel.

In an exclusive interview with Hensley, the Tundra Times asked if there were any truth to those rumors. Hensley also was asked questions concerning some of the other problems facing Alaska and, in particular, the Native people. What follows are some quotes from that interview. Throughout the interview, Hensley would not commit with certainty that he would or wouldn't be running for office.

Because we are a weekly newspaper, the Tundra Times cannot say for sure what Hensley will do prior to the June 1 deadline for filing candidacy papers. However some of his thoughts concerning the "subsistence" issue, ANCSA 7(i), and the "spirit movement" will be of interest to our readers, as well as Hensley's thoughts on the recent censure of rural Democrats by the state democratic party at their convention.

T.T.: Will there be a Hensley candidacy for any statewide office this year?

HENSLEY: "... the idea for a coalition with Hickel was put to rest at least a week before the story emerged in the Anchorage Times. Coalition is a new idea in Alaskan politics and I did not initiate the idea. As a consequence of polling that took place for Hickel, it appeared that as a running mate, I added a substantial percentage to Hickel's potential for winning.

"... Frankly, I think there was some real potential in the match-up, but there

were several questions involved:

Number 1: Whether or not I would indeed be interested in running.

Number 2: Whether or not I would be interested in a coalition-type race, in which I wouldn't have to change my Democratic Party affiliation, and

Number 3: Whether or not the Native leadership was interested in such a match-up.

After mulling these points around, I decided against such a course and Hickel announced he was disinterested in proceeding with the election."

T.T.: If you decide to run, have you decided which party you would seek office with?

HENSLEY: "That's an interesting question. I'm a Democrat and have been since I got involved in politics. The rural areas have been the backbone of the Democratic Party over the years but I think there has been some inability on the part of our party to respond to changes that have been occurring."

Unfortunately my party has seen fit to censure Democrats from the rural areas, which leads me to wonder if they are interested in the welfare of our people, and whether or not they are prepared to deal with the realities of today.

At this time, I am working with the party leadership to see what can be done about appealing to and responding to the needs of the Native people. In fact, I have requested the Democratic Party Central Committee rescind its censuring of the rural Democrats who were engaged in the coalition in Juneau.

I feel if the present leadership of the party is inclined to purify the party, there will be very few left indeed who have not at one time or another supported a Republican candidate."

T.T.: What are some of your reasons for not running?

HENSLEY: "They are partly personal but it is also a question of whether or not it's possible to take care of our interest without actually holding office... Frankly, even being outside the political arena it is possible to do a great deal. Some of the problems that people have are in part a consequence of political decision-making. So many of the more serious problems, however, simply can't be solved by political means..."

T.T.: Is this where the "Spirit Committee" comes in?

HENSLEY: "We've created a great deal of change, which would have come about in any case, but we've not been able to develop a philosophy to deal with that change, a philosophy that can mesh with the people's traditional way of being, seeing, thinking and doing. When you have new institutions, new economics,



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new political structures to deal with, politics is only one element we must deal with. The other arenas such as economics or spiritual are just as important.

What has to be done is a lifelong effort. We are attempting to rejuvenate the human spirit, which in our region is called the "Inuplaq spirit." By that we mean a certain behavior, a certain being, a retention of identity and language. It's an effort to stabilize all the vast changes that have been taking place.

Primarily, it deals with value systems and traditions, with an acceptance of one's self as being 'okay.' It wasn't material goods or benefits that made life happier from a human standpoint. It comes down to the question of human values: a sense of belonging; being loved; a continuity; and an ability to deal with the situation wherever we are.

We've been looking to solutions to our problems from outside — from the outside world. We've been looking to government and every other new institution we thought might work. The truth is these things have only complicated our problems. To me the key solutions lie within each individual, each village and each tribe.

I'm not saying we need to turn the clock back — because we can't. Most of this rejuvenation of our people is basically the traditional values. The maintenance of the Spirit, which is the least we can have as a Native people and still call ourselves a tribe.

It has very little to do with a quantum of blood.

The key elements are in your heart and in your head.

Unless we retain that sense of continuity there is virtually no hope of maintaining what we have fought so long for. It's an involved subject that



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our leadership as well as our people have a very difficult time in being able to accommodate."

T.T.: Is there a correlation between the "Spirit Movement" and subsistence?

HENSLEY: "Yes. There is a whole range of possibilities as far as maintaining a sense of belonging and continuity to a

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# Hensley speaks out

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people. The language might be dead. Your love for the food might be gone. Your understanding of the history of our people might be limited. You may not dress like you are supposed to as far as the encyclopedias are concerned.

So the minimum that has to be maintained is the 'spirit.'

Of course, if you have people that are dependent on the land and its plant life and animal life, that is an absolute part of what they are. It's a part of what you are as a people. That's why 'subsistence' is such an important issue to all Native people as well as those non-Natives who understand and feel this same connection with land and its animal life. They, in effect, want to be in touch with the earth, so the 'subsistence' issue is definitely a keen part of it."

T.T.: We understand that negotiations among the region-

al corporations concerning 7(i) are almost to the point of agreement. Is this true?

HENSLEY: Yes. All the major points involved in the issue have been resolved, including the question of distribution from the Arctic Slope. The drafting committee is finalizing a 100-150 page agreement and we think it's a matter of one more meeting before this thing can be signed, which is going to be a major step forward.

It has been a draining experience over the years in terms of manpower and money and has sometimes created hard feelings among the regions. Partly because this will be resolved outside the courts, but also as something that will tie us together down the road, this will be a major step forward for us.

We will all have a common interest in each other, even if it is just economic interest. It will require that we get together periodically, and that is for the good of us all."