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Barry Jackson: Pre-Democratic Convention Interview

Prior to the State Democratic Convention held in Fairbanks on May 26, 27, and 28, the Tundra Times conducted an interview with Barry Jackson, whose name had been presented as a possible choice for chairman of the convention. However, Eben Hopson was elected temporary chairman and Jackson withdrew his candidacy for permanent chairman in favor of Hopson during the course of the convention. Some of the upcoming issues were discussed during the interview and a general look at the Native in the political scene.

Mr. Jackson has served as counsel for the Alaska Federation of Natives and is currently the attorney for the Tanana Chiefs Conference, one of the most powerful of Alaska's regional Native corporations. The following dialogue ensued.

QUESTION: Do you expect as good a turnout of Natives as you had for the Central District

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Convention?

JACKSON: How many Native delegates will come will depend on how many can put together the money. As far as strength goes, if at least one delegate can come from each district, he can cast all of the votes for that district. However, one man can only attend one committee meeting at a time. Therefore, to participate on committees, they need to be there in force.

QUESTION: What are some of the things that are going to be dealt with at this convention that you see as most vitally affecting Native interest?

JACKSON: One of the most critical issues concerns a change in the party rules to provide for a selection to the national convention at the local level rather than at the state convention. By the McGovern rules, 75 per cent of delegates are supposed to be selected at the local level. Alaska's present plan does not provide for that. At the Central District, we nominated delegates to Miami, but we did not elect them.

QUESTION: Because Native participation tends to be stronger at the local level due to transportation costs, then this change to local election of delegates would be more advantageous to Native interest, is that right?

JACKSON: Certainly. And it will also be an issue whether you apportion strictly on population or on number of democratic votes cast in the state election, or by a combination. Natives will not have as many delegates to the national convention if delegates are apportioned by population as they would have by votes cast.

QUESTION: How important is the Native vote within the convention?

JACKSON: They could swing the convention either way. As part of the Democratic party, they are a strong force.

QUESTION: Do they comprise a solid bloc? I mean by that, will they pretty much hang together on the issues?

JACKSON: Not necessarily. They did not always vote together at the District convention. On the other hand they try to keep together in order to carry more weight.

QUESTION: Is there a Native Democratic leader who

could pull them all together?

JACKSON: No, there is no one Native leader who can do that. It will require a decision on the part of a number of them to pull together as a cohesive bloc.

QUESTION: Do the Natives tend to try to influence politicians from the outside, rather than getting in there and being involved?

JACKSON: Up until now, they did tend to go to the highest level to get influence, established contacts in Washington, and so forth. This is fine if you have limited requirements you are trying to promote. But if you have broad, long-range goals, you need a broader base of operations.

QUESTION: Do you foresee any rise in militancy among Native leaders?

JACKSON: I don't like the word "militancy". To me it's associated with a group that does not have effective power. Militancy is often an example of frustration, of lack of power. This is not true of the Alaskan Native. The Alaskan Native is becoming increasingly aware of his political power and increasingly ready to exercise that power. In most cases, this produces results. This does not imply militancy to me.

QUESTION: What do you foresee as the major issues that will arise at this convention?

JACKSON: I don't know what those issues are, to be honest, and it's important why I don't know. I see my role, if I am elected chairman, as one of moderating the convention, not of pushing through certain issues I want to see dealt with. My function is to see that the deliberative processes operate, to be sensitive to the will of the assembly. Of course, I'm aware of a few issues, but they will have to come up from the floor.

One of the big issues is whether the party can be kept together or whether it will split. The Native delegates to the convention may be critical to this. How they handle their power may determine what happens.

QUESTION: Is there a real possibility the convention could split?

JACKSON: There's the old saying: "I don't belong to an organized party. I'm a Democrat."