

BUSH POWER AT CONVENTION



STRONG NATIVE BLOCK plays crucial role in resolving convention differences. Chuck Degnan of Unalakleet represents the new muscle power of the first Alaskans at the statewide Democratic political convention held this week at Wood Center on the University of Alaska campus in Fairbanks.

—Photo by FRANK MURPHY

Native Politicians Show Surprising Sophistication At Democrat Convention

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How do you have a party if you don't know who the guests are? How do you have a war if you can't identify the enemy? And how do you have a state Democratic political convention if you don't know who the delegates are?

The 1972 state of Alaska Democratic convention hung on this ponderous problem, as a credentials committee met in a lengthy session which dragged into a three-day endurance contest, forestalling all other convention business.

Of the state's four districts, only two were uncontested: the Central and Northwest delegations. Both Southcentral and Southeastern had rump delegations as a result of split conventions at the district level when the young Ad Hoc's challenged the party regulars.

The early election of Eben Hopson, Eskimo leader from Barrow, as temporary chairman was an indication that the Na-

tive contingent would be a strong determining factor throughout the entire convention.

"Temporary" proved to be something of a misnomer as Hopson struggled for three hard-fought days to unite the delegates. It was soon clear that the deadlock was anything BUT temporary.

One of Hopson's first and most critical tasks was to appoint a credentials committee who would, in the long run, play a decisive role in determining who gets seated, who is allowed to vote, who puts together a party platform, and who elects the delegates to the national convention in Miami.

Hopson made full use of a growing force in Alaska politics, a force known as Bush Power, which had already evidenced itself and flexed its muscles at the Central and Northwest district conventions, where Natives turned out in full strength to exercise their surprisingly sophisticated political techniques.

Young Ad Hoc Democrats aligned themselves solidly behind the Native cause, arranging in several cases, free flights to bring Native delegates in from the bush.

Donn Liston, barefoot, wearing coveralls and headband, and calling himself a yippee, explain-

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Native Political Sophistication ...

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ed the Ad Hoc's goals. "We don't want power and we don't want money. We want to make this country responsive to what it could become."

"If we don't accomplish another thing here," said Liston, "we may swing it where the Native has a solid vote."

Putting Bush Power in the driver's seat on the credential's committee, Hopson appointed State Sen. Willie Hensley of Kotzebue, Stan Harhut of Nome, Frank Degnan of Unalakleet, Al Shontz of Nome, Lawrence Davis, Joe Upicksoun of Barrow, Kathy Ostrosky of Dillingham, Andy Edge of Bethel, Frank Thurman of Galena, and Cindy Holeman, Sandra Stringer, Ed Perkowski, and Dr. Donovan Hampton, of Fairbanks.

From that point on, the first Alaskans were wooed and courted from every side by every faction present at the convention. Prominent Native leaders formed a flexible, responsive, and effective wheeling-dealing force, bargaining coolly in every corner of the convention hall in Wood Center on the University of Alaska campus.

The young Ad Hoc movement added a colorfully chaotic character to the otherwise stalled political machine. Girls in striped workmen's coveralls, Afro-headed and long-haired young men, a Pied Piper in a cape with starry planets, flowed through the crowd. The Cartoon Press issued almost-hourly satirical cartoons on the immediately relevant issues.

Their gaiety notwithstanding, they effectively held out against the party regulars, at the same time voicing their willingness to cooperate in effecting a compromise.

South Central regulars refused to be charmed. Unsmilingly, they maintained a rigid position that there could be only one delegation from each district legitimized.

"You seat one or the other."

The convention was a confrontation between youth and age and between aboriginal Americans and not-so-original Americans.

Youth asked, "Who does the country belong to? To the young, as well as to the old?"

And the Native American asked, "Who does this land, this Alaska belong to, the original inhabitants or the late-coming white man?"

The Ad Hoc's, predominantly non-Native, held out the premise that Alaska at least belongs to these first Americans and that they, the young, who are often asked to die for their country, have a right to participate in the political processes of that same country.

Former senator and territorial governor Ernest Gruening, called by many "the grand old man of the Democratic party in Alaska", addressed the delegates on the first night of the convention:

"This great experiment," he said, "is too great to lose. Our whole system is at stake."

The Alaska State Democratic Convention put that system to a stiff test in Fairbanks in the year 1972.

Gruening pleaded: "Let's make a start here and present a convention that will end in harmony and not divisiveness."

As the bulk of the convention cooled its heels in recess, the credentials committee slugged through possible solutions and envoys scurried from group to group, trying to determine what would be acceptable and what could be swallowed by whom.

Hopson, trying to hold together a disintegrating and restless body, spoke to the assembled

delegates, saying: "I want to inform you at this time, I've had a few objections to the progress of this convention."

"The only explanation I can make at this time," he said, "is that you're operating on Indian time."

Later, Hopson pointed out that the Indian time concept had paid off.

"Battles were fought at the edges of the convention rather than at the center."

There were rumblings that Southcentral regulars would walk out. The word "lawsuit" cropped up, as well as "restraining order", and the growing inevitability of continuing the challenge in Miami.

Congressman Nick Begich and Senator Mike Gravel spoke to the convention as the credentials committee remained behind closed doors.

The hall resounded with high-flying phrases such as: "Democracy is based on differences of opinion", "the American Dream", "strength to withstand diversity", "open participatory processes", and "toleration of internal dissent."

Nonetheless, no one looked all that certain the conflicts would be resolved. It was described by most delegates, seated and disputed, that it was a convention that could split wide open.

On the third day a cautious and inscrutable credentials committee filed out, announcing they had a report.

The first recommendation of their chairman, Dr. Hampton, was that at future conventions, it would be wise to have the credentials committee appointed prior to the convention.

The committee further recommended seating the Ad Hoc delegates from the Southeastern and the regular delegates from Southcentral, those who did not walk out of the initially convened district conventions.

A minority report, presented by Sen. Willie Hensley, informed the delegates that the majority report was arrived at only after the Southcentral regulars had been approached and had flatly refused a 70-30 per cent compromise.

An agreement could not be reached and the final motion within the committee was a tie broken by the chairman.

The chair then allowed two representatives from each wing 5 minutes each to debate the report.

A recess was declared and the bargaining began again in earnest. Loyalties and alliances shifted and re-shifted and hung finally with the predominantly Eskimo delegates from the Northwest and the Native leaders and young liberals from the Central district.

Now the convention waited to see if Bush Alaska would hang together. Would the regions be able to put together swift, fluid coalitions outside of the formality of the AFN structure?

Twice within a 15-20 minute period, the Northwest delegates caucused, while Tanana Chief's Tim Wallis and Sam Kito, with studied casualness, moved in and around to confer with Arctic Slope's Upicksoun, Sen. Hensley, Degnan, Rep. Martin Moore D-Emmonak, and other Northwest Native leaders.

"No one wants to rump a convention." The supporters of the minority report urged that no delegates be sent home, that every delegate be seated with fractional vote based on the 70-30 per cent compromise.

When the convention began to noticeably disintegrate in

floor discussions, the venerable Sen. Gruening, aged 85, majestically addressed the body.

"We have a chance," he said, "to leave the convention in harmony, in a manner that includes everybody and excludes nobody. Let's get behind this sound and reasonable proposal."

Putting it back together again, the body of unchallenged delegates voted to adopt the minority report by a vote of 68½ for to 3½ opposed.

The convention was now rolling and with a collective sigh of relief, adjourned until Monday.

Monday began with an overall feeling of anti-climax. Tired delegates straggled in and the day got off to a deceptively slow start.

The first order of business was to adopt the fractional vote of .7 and .3 recommended in the minority report for the newly combined and seated districts.

The motion carried by unanimous consent, accompanied by spontaneous applause. It was a hopeful indication of a new spirit of cooperation.

The delegates then made Hopson official permanent chairman, and elected a relatively unknown Ad Hoc, Mike Murray, as permanent secretary, both by unanimous consent.

Hopson then appointed Barry Jackson, Fairbanks attorney with strong Native connections, as chairman of the Committee on Committees.

Jackson quickly organized the delegates into committees and the remainder of the day was spent in intensive committee sessions.

As the day wore on and energies revived, new issues began to emerge out of the committee rooms, the most controversial being the nominating committee for selection of national delegates, and the committee assigned to put together a party platform.

The tenuously united delegates, interchanging ideas and testing new compromises, needed more time to again resolve their differences and make the final choices aimed at what platform Alaskan Democrats would take to Miami and who would take it.

The former Ad Hoc's, now designated only as young liberals, the party regulars, and the Native delegates exercising Bush Power once again working it out together, held over for one more day to complete this final work of the 1972 convention.