

State Sen. Arliss Sturgulewski

Recent events in Juneau were tumultuous. In the middle of an Alaska summer, 20 state senators crowded around a horseshoe-shaped table in the Senate Finance Committee room. We were flanked by the legal counsels of the Senate and the governor, observed in minute detail by state and national press, and watched and read about by a large number of fellow Alaskans.

The Senate was responding to the Grand Jury's recommendation that we convene in special session to "consider the evidence presented to and the findings of the Grand Jury for the express purpose of initiating impeachment procedures against Governor William Sheffield."

Tension was high. Lighthearted moments were rare and, when they came, were greeted with relief. Senators were on hand for hour after long hour.

Telephone calls from back home were infrequent but wires, letters, and public opinion messages were numerous. Diverse opinions were expressed; some were critical or complimentary of the Grand Jury; there was advice on impeach or do not im-

peach; many said, "It's business as usual so what's the big deal?"; we heard cries of partisanship perceived by one side or another.

I feel it is important for each of us to put the happenings of recent weeks into perspective, and in this article I would like to share my views.

One thing is certain: as a body, the Senate did not find clear and convincing evidence that the governor committed an impeachable offense. Left unaddressed in strong terms are the lessons we must learn from this unfortunate episode in Alaska's young experience in statehood. If a clear set of standards of behavior for public officials had been set by the current administration, the Grand Jury would not have met and made its recommendations; the Senate would not have convened in special session to consider impeachment; Alaskans would not have become even more cynical toward their elected leaders; and Alaska would not have been subjected once again to unflattering national press.

However, the impeachment proceedings did occur.

Although this entire episode was an unfortunate occurrence, I see opportunity and promise in several areas that can do much to restore public confidence and trust.

— **The unquestioned job of government is to serve the public interest.** Moral authority with clear, direct, and strong leadership must come from the Chief Executive of our state. This must set the tone for public employees in their conduct of public business. It must not be bartered away for favors to campaign contributors and supporters, or as an excuse to break rules to get things done, or to help our friends, or to punish our enemies. If employees — be they chiefs of staff, department heads or whoever — don't follow tough standards of ethical conduct, they should not be allowed to serve.

— **Policies should be clear and straightforward.** Within the statutory framework, the administration must see that policies as well as statutes and regulations are understood and implemented by department heads and other public employees. What more powerful evidence of a system

gone awry than when public employees resort to retention of private counsel to protect their rights because they feel pressure to take inappropriate actions?

— **Contracting procedures need refinement.** Immediate steps should be taken by the executive branch to tighten regulations that allow for use of sole source contracting. Sole source contracts can, at times, be in the public interest, but specific standards must be established to assure that the public's interest is being served. Otherwise, the specter of abuse is present.

— **The Governor's office should set standards that prohibit any possible release of "insider" information regarding potential contracts.** Wall Street and the banking industry know the swift fall from grace when insider rules are broken. Contracts should not be tainted by leaked information. It is not enough to say "Well, anybody could have access to the information if they asked for it."

— **A thorough review of procurement practices and procedures is needed.** The select interim committee established by Senate resolution to study pro-

curement practices and procedures will consider Grand Jury recommendations dealing with Alaska Statutes governing sole sources contracts, bid waivers, a code of ethics for the executive branch, and employee awareness of ethical obligations. The Legislature will consider their recommendations in the next session.

— **A review of the Grand Jury system is important.** The resolution passed by the Senate requests that the Judicial Council review the Grand Jury system. I appreciate the work of the Grand Jury. Their report showed that they felt the governor had committed the grave offense of perjury and had acted inappropriately in the matter of the Fairbanks office lease. A strong, independent Grand Jury system must be retained, but "due process" and Grand Jury procedures need review.

We live in a young state with a whole lot going for us. We've gone through a trying time. If we deal constructively with what we have learned, we shouldn't have to go through it ever again.