

Interview with Rep. Al Adams of the Bush Caucus

Interview conducted 2-5-86 by Laury Roberts Scandling

Tundra Times Juneau correspondent

This begins a series of verbatim interviews with rural lawmakers in the Alaska State Legislature who make up the Bush Caucus.

Representative Al Adams, 43, is a Democrat from Kotzebue. He was elected to the House in 1980 and in less than six months was installed as chairman of the powerful Finance Committee when the Bush Caucus backed a takeover of the House leadership by minority Republicans in June of 1981. He has an associate's degree in electronics and worked in Fairbanks for ten years tracking satellites. He later became the director of rural development for the state and served on the Alaska Native Appeals Board. He has worked for the NANA regional corporation and the Kotzebue village corporation. Adams was reared in Kotzebue and went to high school at Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka. He now commercial fishes in the summer and has six children.

Tundra Times: Tell us about the organization of the Bush Caucus which has been in effect many, many years?

ADAMS: We meet about once every three weeks and we have designated responsibilities. Our issues are basically designed on what our basic needs are in particular areas and also legislation that affects us. There are about nine of us in it and Jack Fuller (of Nome) is chairman. As you can understand, in the rural areas we don't take that much advantage of the operating budget. The only thing we have going for us is the capital budget.

Tundra Times: Subsistence, at least for rural legislators, will be a big issue this year.



Rep. Al Adams at a recent Juneau meeting of the full board of the Alaska Federation of Natives.

photo by Jim Benedetto

ADAMS: What we'd like to see is the subsistence bill the governor has proposed. We know there are many changes being made in (Senate) State Affairs that will not be good for rural residents, and I think if we see it coming in that form I think we'll see the governor veto it. We might as well stick with the subsistence law that is on record, the one that was passed in 1978. Somebody asked me, "What about enforcement?" Enforcement will be done by the feds, which can go along until we make some changes.

Tundra Times: What do you think should be the bottom line criterion for allowing people subsistence use of resources?

ADAMS: Basically, it's an economic need, income, and also the location.

Tundra Times: Are you saying that if a bush resident's cash income is above a certain level he shouldn't have subsistence priority?

ADAMS: No, I'm saying everybody in the (rural) community should be allowed to no matter what their income is.

Tundra Times: So, you're saying location is a priority followed by income?

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ADAMS: It's too early to specify on something like that. I'd like to wait and see what comes over from the Senate to see if it falls under the guidelines AFN has developed for us. We're having a feud right now because of a legal opinion that's come out from Alaska Legal Services that says it would be best to have no subsistence bill at this particular time.

Tundra Times: What about the idea of establishing a buffer account with some of the additional dollars that have come in from tax settlements with oil companies?

ADAMS: Let me put it this way: remember when we set up the Permanent Fund? And now it sits at nearly \$7 billion. Wasn't that the purpose behind it? To use part of the money that was earned by the fund for the operation of state government at some time? Some say what we're doing is just trying to find another buffer. Personally, I worry about the capitalization, how much money should go into that particular fund. And second, the constitutionality about putting a new constitutional amendment on it. I say that because we passed a spending limit in 1982 which did not work, I'm saying before we get another spending limit let's get it down in writing and see if it will work.

Tundra Times: So, you're saying a buffer account could be a duplication?

ADAMS: That's one of my arguments on it. Some people have different concepts of why the Permanent Fund was set up. We need to go back and look at the record.

Tundra Times: What should the money be used for if it's not saved?

ADAMS: We should put aside the \$243 million (from the pipeline tariff settlement) until we see the March revenue projections. Now, we'll have approximately \$105 million dollars coming from Sohio, but we passed a bill last year and one section said any windfalls that come to the state (before March

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1) must go into the Rainy Day Account which now has approximately \$298 million. If oil prices stay at the low they are at now, between \$15.50 and \$16.50 (spot market), there will be a considerable decline in our revenue and it will be in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Tundra Times: What about the Local Boundary Commission decision (to detach about 2 million acres from the North Slope Borough)? If the Legislature doesn't do anything by March 8, it goes into effect.

ADAMS: The Senate and House this week are going to be hearing a report on how the decision was reached. My position and Senator (Frank) Ferguson's position is that we supported the detachment. And, we were hoping that before it got into a decision with the Local Boundary Commission that the leadership (of NSB and NANA) would come up with some type of agreement and we're still hoping they can do something.

Tundra Times: Why would they do something now that the LBC has made a decision?

ADAMS: Well, we're both going to keep living there for many years and we'd like to continue keeping a relationship between each other very good because we're related to each other.

Tundra Times: So, you mean an agreement that is suitable to both sides regardless of the official decision?

ADAMS: Yes, and perhaps it's working together to help North Slope find some compensation for the land they lost, through land, (exchanges) versus

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funding. That's one thing we've asked them to look at.

Tundra Times: How do you feel about the pay raise for legislators? (In 1983 pay for lawmakers went from \$18,000 per year plus \$80 for each day of the session to \$46,000 annually, minus per diem.)

ADAMS: We should have a bill on the floor by Wednesday (February 12). I never voted for the pay raise in the first place.

Tundra Times: What should legislators be making?



Representative Al Adams (D—Kotzebue)

ADAMS: I think we should be paid in the neighborhood of \$30,000 a year, and should be paid a per diem for your committee work in the interim. You could follow the federal guidelines as far as the per diem rate in the state of Alaska.

Tundra Times: Should you get per diem during the session as well?

ADAMS: That's negotiable.

Tundra Times: What has been your biggest lesson since you took over as finance chairman? You sort of came out of obscurity. It must have been a shock for you.

ADAMS: It was. I think just the budget process. It takes a lot of work and being able to recognize needs throughout the state, not just in my particular district. And, trying to work with 62 people, elected just like myself. The worse thing I can say as to being a legislator is you don't have a private life.

Tundra Times: I read that you hosted a reception here for the mayor of the North Slope Borough. Yet, you had been associated with the prior administration.

ADAMS: Senator Ferguson and I would like, with everything that's been going on with the North Slope, to try to build a working relationship with

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not only the political system, but with the administration. I had the governor there and different commissioners to build a relationship (to show) that this (borough) administration can do the same thing as the past administration, and that is, communicate with government.

Tundra Times: Do you feel that bridge hasn't been established between the state and the North Slope Borough as of yet?

ADAMS: The communication was there but it wasn't — how can I put this? — as well as it should be. So, I was, hopefully, getting everybody together so that we can put down our swords and sticks and come to the table and at least be able to talk to each other.

Tundra Times: How long do you see yourself staying in the legislature?

ADAMS: At least two more years. I'd like to finish up with some of my projects, such as the Red Dog Mine development agreements with the state. The other thing I've been working on is the Naval Petroleum Reserve where they (the North Slope Borough) get a portion of federal funds for impacted communities.
