

# Voice for sovereignty gets louder every day

by Paul Swetzof  
for the Tundra Times

Native people are demanding tribal government. These demands for self-determination are becoming louder and more aggressive by the day, and well they should be.

## OPINION

Our homelands are under attack, primarily by the state of Alaska and Alaska's congressional delegation.

Unfortunately, some of our corporate leaders are also more than willing to sell the heritage of their people for a buck and a corporate promotion.

It is time to focus our energies to save our cultures and our homelands.

We need an effective organization dedicated to our goals of tribal government within our homelands.

Currently one organization exists for this purpose, the Alaska Native Coalition.

ANC has good people who are dedicated to the strengthening of Native governments in our villages. Unfortunately, ANC has not been able to aggressively represent us.

Some reasons for ANC's weaknesses include a lack of funding, difficulty in communication between member villages (owing to the great distances between villages and regions), no full-time office with staff and no grant writers, as well as other major and minor difficulties.

Were it not for the dedication of people such as Willie Kassayulie and Dalee Sambo, and our friends at the Anchorage office of the Native American Rights Fund, ANC would exist in name only.

Seizing the moment is a very important concept. The moment is now. We must either restructure ANC or form a new organization.

Our organization must start out right from the beginning. A statewide office should be set up and staffed where the most people have access to it, probably Anchorage.

Full-time grant writers must be on staff. Sovereignty advocates experienced and expert in Indian law, lobbying and other needed skills should be placed on call.

An executive council elected by the member villages should be ready to go to work as quickly as possible.

A campaign to enlist the village governments, as well as villages wanting to formalize their village government should be initiated.

A newsletter should be printed at least four times each year.

Village liaisons from each member village should be appointed by their respective villages.

In other words, our organization must be recognized as the voice of our member villages and as a force to be respected by both our friends and foes.

It is absolutely necessary that all villages and village organizations keep in mind that we have common goals.

These goals include the preservation

and enhancement of our respective homelands, our cultures, our governments and our customary and traditional hunting and fishing.

These common goals far outweigh the differences which often exist between us.

Our survival may depend on our willingness to speak with one voice, and not have renegade factions running all over the place trying to see who can yell the loudest or who is more politically astute.

The time for game playing is over. We can't afford to play games or feed the egos of those who are on an ego trip.

Finally, we must take great care that membership is restricted to Alaska Natives only.

Our policy and other decision making meetings, with rare exceptions, should be open to Alaska Natives only, with an emphasis on participation by villagers representing as many tribes as possible.

It is imperative that the lawyers, consultants and other so-called professionals be kept out of our discussions unless we have determined that we need to use them for a specific purpose.

It has been the experience of many of us that the lawyers tend to dominate a meeting once they get through the door. In general, they love to tell you what is best for you.

Believe me, we are very capable of making responsible and culturally sensitive decisions.

The Rural Alaska Community Action Program has adopted tribal government issues as a priority. Staff members will assist tribes to organize on a statewide basis.

RURALCAP has pledged its role will be that of a coordinator, and that any agenda, action, or policy for tribes or tribal government will be decided only by the tribes themselves.

RURALCAP will provide limited funding for the first meeting, after that the agency will assist the new organization only in finding funding which will enable a permanent statewide structure.

RURALCAP will be sending a letter to each IRA and traditional council in Alaska asking for a resolution of support for a statewide tribal government organization.

RURALCAP is also requesting village comment on the best time to hold an organizational meeting, where the best place in Anchorage would be for the meeting, and any other information regarding funding or technical assistance.

We are all at a critical crossroads. We currently have the momentum on our side.

It is critical that we take advantage of the momentum now to establish an organization which will be capable of moving forward with our goals and aspirations until they see the full light of day, and then keep moving to help assure that our inherent sovereignty can stand up to future threats.

Let's do it.