

Guest Editorial—

The Questions are: How Much? Where?

Native leaders from throughout the state met the past week in Fairbanks regarding the question of aboriginal land claims. It is amazing how in the short span of a few years the Natives have organized and become a strong, unified force.

The Native leaders indicated to us how put out they were at Governor Walter J. Hickel for his recent stand on the claims question. They say that his position now is almost opposite to his stand, as they understood it, before the election. And they gave forth with their fears that the Governor is tied much too closely to oil interests in the lower forty-eight.

"Two jets with oil company executives flew into Juneau for the inauguration," one Native leader told us. The Native leader then went on to elaborate that many of the Governor's appointments had been persons who had formerly worked for oil companies.

The point of this is that a schism appears to be developing between the Native leaders and the Governor and this rift is apt to grow wider as time passes.

The position of the Alaska Congressional delegation as well as that of former Governor William A. Egan in 1961 appeared to be about the position that Hickel takes now that the "carving out" of huge areas of the state by Natives would impede Alaska's development. What is significant is that in the two or three years after 1961, there was a dramatic shift of opinion by the Congressional delegation and the former governor.

It was reasoned that it was the federal government who owed for aboriginal claims and that it would be the federal government who would pay. The payment presumably could be used by Native Alaskans for development and in the end, since Natives comprise about one-fourth of the population, the state would benefit.

The Alaska Congressional delegation, the former governor, as well as the Native leaders, agreed that the quickest way to resolve the issue of land claims was to get legislation passed in Congress to permit taking the question of the validity of claims directly to the U.S. Court of Claims and to provide for claims to be administratively settled by a commission.

Now it appears, with the change in administration, instead of the present Governor supporting enabling legislation in the U.S. Congress, he is preparing to go into court charging that the Natives have no claims at all and forcing the Natives into a court battle that could take years, if not decades. We do not believe that the people of this state will support the position that the Natives of Alaska do not have claim to land. They most certainly have rightful claims; the questions are how much and where.

The Congressional bill proposed by the Native federation deserves the support of the Governor and the Native leaders will have good reason to be disappointed if they don't get it.

—Jessen's Weekly