

# Potency of Native Politics--

## *Statewide Politicians Can Not Ignore Native Vote*

By LAEL MORGAN

Six years ago the Alaskan native was a political nonentity. Statewide candidates, the state legislature, pollsters — just about everybody but the welfare agencies — ignored him. Under the U.S. Constitution he had a vote, of course, but he wasn't expected to use it.

Today, although Indians and Eskimos represent only a fifth of Alaska's population, their vote constitutes 25 per cent of the total ballot, which no statewide politician can afford to ignore.

Nine Eskimo and Indian delegates currently serve in the state representatives in the rest of the United States. And voter education is high priority in

future planning of native leaders.

The potential of the native electorate was first recognized in 1965 when Democrat Mike Gravel, then speaker of the State House, figured if he could garner the "Bush" vote, he could win a statewide election, even if he lost in all three major cities.

With this in mind, he backed the building of regional high schools in rural areas and cultivated native alliances.

Gravel was defeated in the race for the U.S. House in 1966, but only because his losses in major population centers were heavier than he'd anticipated. His faith in the native vote was sound and carried him to a U.S. Senate seat two years later.

Also courting the natives in

1966 was Republican Walter Hickel, making his debut as candidate for governor, and Howard Pollock, a veteran state legislator out to win Ralph Rivers' seat in the U.S. House.

Neither man had traveled much in remote areas of the state. Both professed shock at the conditions of poverty they saw among natives there and pledged to seek remedy. Both men won.

### THE NEW WAVE

So did two articulate young politicians who would add momentum to the native drive for power. Athabascan Indian John Sackett of Galena, a member of the Republican majority, landed a seat on the influential House Finance Com-

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mittee and Eskimo Willie Hensley, a Democrat from Kotzebue, buckled down to a House apprenticeship that would later help him unseat state Sen. Bob Blodgett, a non-native.

It was Hensley who pressed the land claims suit of Alaskan natives against the federal government which had never purchased aboriginal title to Alaska. Reading from one of his college research papers, Hensley introduced the issue at a meeting of the Juneau Democratic Club in a cramped hotel basement.

Before his first legislative session was done, he mustered strength to pass a bill promising a state royalty to Indians and Eskimos if the federal government would settle their claims.

That same spring a statewide coalition of natives formed to push a federal settlement through Congress. Outsiders predicted the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) would not survive because it required close cooperation among aborigines who had warred for centuries.

The natives buried their differences, however, and overcame barriers of diversified languages and cultures to gain a billion-dollar Congressional settlement in just five years. In the process AFN proved excellent training ground for a new wave of native leaders.

The potential of this schooling became apparent when Emil Notti, former AFN president, made a surprisingly good showing as a candidate for secretary of state in 1970. Although hampered by a fear of flying, lack of time and money, Notti pulled 12,759 votes.

This was over 2,000 votes more than Charles Sassara of Anchorage who placed third, and only 1,945 votes behind winner Red Boucher. Boucher spent an estimated \$100,000 on his campaign as compared to Notti's \$8,500.

Growing coordination among native politicians was demonstrated during the 1971 legislature with formation of a strong voting bloc of rural legislators. Since statehood there had been a fair number of native legislators.

Frank Peratrovich, a Tlingit Indian, had even served as president of the Senate, but the natives had generally worked independent of each other.

In contrast, the "Bush Bloc" under the leadership of Rep. Ed Naughton, D-Kodiak, showed a talent for compromise and united solidly on bread and butter issues.

By allying itself with factions from urban areas and would-be statewide candidates, it swung the appointment of George Hohman, D-Bethel, (a white with an Eskimo constituency) as head of the House Finance Committee and carried home so much money that the

legislative appropriation for the last two years has been known as the "Bush Budget".

"Unfortunately, Anchorage and the bush legislators got the graveyard and Fairbanks got only a few bones," sniffed Rep. John Holm, R-Fairbanks, who represents the state's second largest city. "That is pure blackmail as far as I'm concerned for Rep. Hohman."

Sen. John Butrovich, R-Fairbanks, chairman of the Senate Budget Free Conference Committee, agreed. "The chairman of the House committee is from the bush and he thinks bush. The bush was well taken care of. Well enough so I don't anticipate the bush will have a chairman of either committee for a while."

Speaker of the House Gene Guess, an Anchorage Democrat, had to dicker with the Bush Bloc to secure his leadership position.

"The Bush Caucus has become extremely effective," he observed. "Members show mutual concern for each other's problems but they are extremely selective on areas they want to push as far as a bloc vote, which shows good politics."

"This year they've developed the ability to deal with administrative agencies. The rural legislator has to be more than just a lawmaker. He has to be a liaison between village agencies and the state government, where urbanites can rely on their city representatives."

A reapportionment plan set in action by the state just before this fall's election, wiped out some districts represented by native leaders and pitted several effective Eskimo legislators against one another.

Miraculously the natives emerged still holding nine seats, but some good men were unseated in the process and it's feared that future reapportionment will cut the native delegation.

Even with diminishing membership, however, Rep. Mike Bradner, D-Fairbanks, believes the Bush Bloc will become increasingly effective.

"The rural legislator is forced to be a full-time professional despite the lower wage and he learns more about the system he is dealing with than the urban legislator," Bradner reasons. "The Anchorage Times keeps urban legislators professing to be part time and they're forced to go running home and earn a wage. (Many native legislators manage to live on legislative salary and make politics a full time job).

"As a result, the rural legislators will know how to get things done better. Knowledgeability and the time they have will outweigh the fact they have less votes."

NEXT WEEK: Eying the urban voters.