

Publisher's Notes

AFN SPECIAL CONVENTION ACHIEVED A DELICATE BALANCE

When the gavel came down at the opening of the Alaska Federation of Natives Special Convention, March 26, no one, delegate or observer, could have predicted the final outcome.

The purpose of the convention seemed clear enough; that is, gaining approval for the eight concepts proposed by AFN, which would ultimately be used to draft amendments to be submitted to Congress to bolster land protections in ANCSA. The process for approving those concepts was understandable as was the time schedule.

The unknown factor at the start of the meeting on 1991 was how the representatives of the village and regional corporations and the other factions involved would respond to those proposed concepts and the attendant issues.

What was also variable was whether the call for unity put forth by AFN and others would be heeded by the more than 800 delegates gathered in Anchorage. At times, it seemed doubtful that even a semblance of unity was possible, particularly during the heated debate on the "dissenter's rights" concept.

However, even during the rage of the debate on some of the more complicated matters, during the inspiring speeches, and the grandstanding by opposing factions, during the time between the frequent caucuses and recesses, the atmosphere in the Howard Rock Ballroom fairly crackled with energy, very positive energy.

There was a vibrancy that could not be duplicated in any other setting as Alaska Natives struggled together in mutual concern for protecting the land, and there was a distinctive cultural flavor when at least one of the regional caucuses was conducted in Yupik.

There were some minor upsets when the Association of Village Council Presidents and Calista walked out in protest to a vote, and compromise when Sealaska persuaded them to return to iron out the differences. And there was much, what appeared to be great disagreement about ANCSA in general, the purposes of it, about corporations, about governance issues, and philosophical perspectives on control and management of the land and protections of the land for future generations.

From an outsider's point of view, the convention may have seemed chaotic with too many factions separated by radically differing opinions of how best to amend the Act; with issues too complicated to be worked through the process in three days; and the regional and cultural differences that sometimes looked like barriers to unity.

With the context of AFN's and ANCSA's history, however, the Special Convention appeared orderly, smoothly run, definitely positive, and above all productive. There was unity among the delegates and other factions at the Convention, and the unifying element was concern for the land and a sincere desire to find a way of keeping it within Native Control after 1991.

The United Tribes of Alaska played a significant role at this Convention because there was a need for checks if balance was to be achieved. UTA's radically different approach to ANCSA may not have been welcomed by some, but in the final analysis, UTA may have brought about the delicate balance that was achieved at AFN's Special Convention.

If the overall goal of amending ANCSA to add protections against the sale of stock in 1991 and all of the other critical issues, the delicate balance will have to be maintained.