

Message from Governor Ernest Gruening to the Thirtieth Convention  
of the Alaska Native Brotherhood in Hoonah

November 8-13, 1943

Message delivered by Acting Governor E. L. Bartlett

To the Delegates and Members of the Alaska Native Brotherhood:

It is a great pleasure and privilege to extend greetings to the Alaska Native Brotherhood and to express my deep regret that, owing to my absence from the Territory on official business, I have not been able to accept your kind invitation to attend in person. Nothing would have given me greater satisfaction than to have come to the gathering in Hoonah, to have met and talked with the various delegates and to have discussed with you problems of mutual interest.

I feel that these conventions of the Alaska Native Brotherhood are valuable, and can and should be productive of much benefit to the native peoples of Alaska. Particularly is this convention important now, because events bearing closely on the welfare of the Indian people of Alaska are taking place. Changes are occurring in Alaska and more changes are to come in which all of us, I am sure, are vitally concerned.

If I were present to address you I would talk to you about my belief in the necessity for the native people of Alaska to assume a more important part in the conduct of Territorial affairs. I would talk to you about the necessity of improving your economic condition. I would talk to you about the desirability of improving your social position. These three major aspects of life--political, economic, social--are all matters of immediate and vital concern. You can improve your position in each of these fields. You should give much thought and all possible effort to that end.

The native peoples of Alaska--Indian, Aleut and Eskimo--are approximately one half of our population; they are our oldest population; they have been here for centuries. They came before the white man. They live pretty generally in the villages where they have always lived. They can be counted upon to continue to live there. The native peoples are consequently doubly distinguished among all others in Alaska because not only have their homes always been here, but always will be here. The native peoples are, therefore, not among those Alaskans--regrettably far too numerous--whose plan and purpose is to make as much money as quickly as possible and then quit Alaska taking all they have made outside with them and leaving nothing here. The native peoples are not even among that much larger group of Alaskans who are merely fair weather Alaskans, who spend only the summer in Alaska, and who pass their fall, winter and spring "outside." The native peoples, clearly, are not among those whose aim is to take something from Alaska to somewhere else. So that in every sense of the word the native peoples are the truest, year-in-year-out, all-season, one hundred per cent Alaskans.

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It seems to me, therefore, that the native peoples are entitled to a larger share of the well-being of Alaska's economy, to a louder voice in its government, to a greater participation in the Territory's social progress, than they have hitherto enjoyed.

It is a strange and regrettable fact that, when every two years the people of Alaska elect representatives and senators to our legislature, they do not elect, and have not in recent years elected, a single representative of your people. Hitherto our legislature has been composed of twenty-four members--eight senators and sixteen representatives. Now, as a result of a reapportionment bill, which I earnestly sought, and the passage of which our able delegate in Congress, Anthony Dimond, secured, the legislature is to be enlarged. Our legislature is henceforth to have sixteen senators and twenty-four representatives. The reason for this new law, the reason for the enlargement of our legislature was not merely for the purpose of having more representatives and more senators.

The reason for this change was that it was desirable to give the Alaska people representation in proportion to population. Under the old bill the twenty-five thousand residents of the First Division, which as you know is southeastern Alaska, were represented in the legislature by only the same number--namely two senators and four representatives--as the eleven thousand residents in the Second Division along the Bering and Arctic Seas. Really the discrimination was even greater than the population figures show, because the people of the First Division voted in far larger numbers than the people of the Second. Recent election statistics show that about four times as many people voted for Delegate or for legislators in the First Division than voted in the Second Division. This will be largely, if not wholly, corrected by the new bill which is in effect henceforth. In the First Division we will elect four senators and eight representatives, instead of two senators and four representatives as previously.

However, if the purpose of this legislation was to secure a better and truer representation, it will not be achieved if half of our population still continues to be unrepresented. In other words, I strongly believe that the native people of Alaska should take advantage of this enlarged legislature by nominating in the primaries next April, and electing in the general election next September, worthy representatives who may go to Juneau and take part in the proceedings of the legislature. Not only would such representation be in harmony with the spirit of our American ideals and principles, but here in Alaska it is really necessary and essential that the native people be truly a part of the electorate in proportion to their numbers and make their voice and their vote felt. The evidence for that necessity was made very clear at the last session of the legislature.

If you do not know the facts, I think it desirable that I tell them to you. A bill, largely sponsored by the Alaska Native Brotherhood which had the approval and support of the Governor's Office, was introduced for the purpose of ending the discrimination against native peoples, which I regret to say is occasionally found in certain restaurants and other public establishments in Alaska. Since I have been Governor, I have tried to eliminate this discrimination wherever I found it by personal interviews with the proprietors of these establishments. I can assure you that nothing has been more deeply offensive to me since I came to Alaska than to see a sign in a restaurant: "No natives allowed", or "We do not cater to native trade",



or some similar phrase. I am glad to report that in at least one instance, I have been able by persuasion to bring about the withdrawal of such a sign and the elimination of the practice which this sign proclaimed. However, in other cases in spite of my utmost efforts nothing was done because there was no law under which the proprietor could be compelled to cease this un-American discrimination. Particularly did this discrimination--always in my judgment without reason--seem to me inexcusable when we are engaged in a great war for liberty and equality, and waging that war against enemies who boast of discrimination in varying degrees against all other races and peoples. It seemed to me infamous that we should have such a practice here.

So this equal treatment bill, or anti-discrimination bill, was introduced in the last, the sixteenth, legislature. It failed of passage in the House of Representatives by a vote of nine to seven. It was indicated that with certain amendments, with certain slight changes the bill would have a chance of passage. So that bill was redrawn, not in any respect, I believe, a poorer bill, and was introduced in the Senate. There, I am happy to say, it passed by a vote of seven to one--an excellent showing. In the House of Representatives however, it was defeated by a vote of eight to eight--the smallest margin by which a measure can be defeated. It requires a majority of nine to seven to pass any measure; a tie vote defeats it. So this bill was defeated, and those members of the legislature who voted against it have on their record the blot of approving formally and by their vote this un-American and unwarranted discrimination against a group of fellow Americans who have lived in the Territory far longer and who have every right to consider themselves as true Alaskans as any.

It appears, therefore, clear, that the native peoples have both a right and a duty to exert themselves, to assert themselves, and, by taking an active part in our political life, to see that such an unfortunate exhibition of prejudice and bigotry is not repeated. The first thing, then, is for the Alaska Native Brotherhood delegates to make sure that their people know how important this issue is. The next step is to see that they register for the next general election; that they nominate suitable candidates in the primaries and try to elect them in the general election. In addition it is important for them--for you--to know what the record of each legislator is who has served in the legislature in previous years and to judge him on his past performance. It is no less important that you try to find out what the principles and policies on important questions affecting the welfare of the native people--and indeed affecting the general welfare--will be, in the case of every new candidate who has not yet served.

Your participation in public life to the extent of your ability to achieve it is not merely desirable and necessary for your own protection and your own advancement. Your participation will be helpful to protect and advance the interest of all Alaskans of whom you are so large, so essential, and so permanent a part. Remember that it is your duty as well as your privilege as Americans to exercise your civil rights. And the first of these rights is to vote and to vote intelligently and conscientiously. So much for the political aspects.

On the economic and social front, it is highly desirable that the native people raise their standard of living, that they secure longer and less seasonal employment at better wages. But as long as your employment continues to be seasonal, try to make one season's earnings last till the next.



If like so many of us you feel tempted, in the possession of a whole season's earnings, to do a little spending, put some of it into savings, into war bonds, or invest it in the improvement of your home. Better housing is a crying need in your villages. Use, I urge you, a part of the proceeds of your livelihood to improve your own surroundings. The native peoples must have better dwellings and better community facilities. While the Federal Government cooperates in these matters to a certain degree--and I will do my best to secure whatever federal cooperation appears justified--the greatest progress will come from the efforts of the native people themselves in developing their self-reliance, in working to improve their community and in raising their standard of living. Individually and collectively you can do far more to help yourselves than you have in the past. The Alaska Native Brotherhood can be an important instrument in helping you work your way up and out to the attainment of your needs and desires.

I fear my message has reached too great length. Were I with you in person I could perhaps expand my thoughts more fully. But in conclusion I wish to say that I am only too happy to work with you to the fullest extent in reaching these objectives I have discussed and I wish you the greatest success in your efforts to do so.