

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Bush Cabinet Appointments and Effects on Indians

By the time this issue of Siletz News is in your hands, President Bush's cabinet appointments should already have been confirmed by the U.S. Congress.

As I write this, however, the confirmation of two extremely important cabinet positions affecting Indian tribes, the attorney general and the secretary of the interior, are still up for grabs. The backgrounds of John Ashcroft, nominee to head the Justice Department, and Gale Norton, the Department of Interior, are being subjected to intense scrutiny because of their track records on a wide variety of issues.

We can be sure of one thing. Whoever is confirmed most likely will be Republican. Although Indian tribes have generally supported Democratic candidates for national offices, we should keep in mind that some of our staunchest Indian advocates have been Republicans.

Our own Mark Hatfield, for one, consistently fought for Indian causes and despite his moral opposition to gambling, understood how important Indian gaming is to the economic well being of Indian tribes and gave it his support. Similarly, Republican Sen. John McCain, as chair of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, understood tribal sovereignty and battled vigorously on behalf of Indian tribes on many issues.

We also should remember that President Nixon's administration instituted major policy changes that were favorable to Indian tribes. At the same time, there have been and are Democrats in Congress who have fought against, and continue to fight against, Indian rights and programs.

My point is that we don't know how the new officials will act on Indian issues. Simply being



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Democrat or Republican doesn't determine whether they support, or are hostile to, Indians. In any event, we need to actively educate, work with, and make an effort to gain the support of these government officials, whichever side of the political fence they are on.

Kitzhaber's Executive Order Continues

As for the state of Oregon, we are fortunate that Gov. John Kitzhaber has been re-elected for another term. He can continue to implement his executive order that requires his departments to work with Oregon tribes on a government-to-government basis. This continues the efforts initiated by former Gov. Vic Atiyeh, a Republican.

We have reported in previous issues of Siletz News how the governor and his top staff meet annually with tribal government officials, the most recent being held on the Portland State University campus. Has the governor's executive order and these annual government-to-government meetings really made any difference? I can state emphatically that they have, which can be attested to by our own tribal staff.

First of all, state officials have a greater understanding of and respect for the cultural, social, and political nature of the Siletz Tribe. Mike Kennedy, our tribal forester, says it has helped in concrete ways.

We now know exactly who to call to get answers on issues and he cited the Department of Environmental Quality as an example of how the state is working cooperatively with us on specific environmental issues.

Tina Retasket, assistant GM, states that the nature of the relationship has changed. Rather than imposing their control over tribes, state agencies are increasingly treating tribes as governments, not as just another social organization. For example, in health and human services, rather than imposing their standards and control, state agencies are even developing separate codes to accommodate the unique needs of the Siletz Tribe.

I believe the governor's executive order continues to have a profound impact, and I can speak specifically about relationships between the state and the Siletz Tribe. It has helped set the climate and framework for relationships based on respect and cooperation which, in turn, are reflected in the constructive way that concrete issues are being addressed. It's up to us to build on this foundation.

Issues of Confidential Tribal Information

The issue I am about to address involves the publication of letters to the editor in Siletz News. Although it's basically an internal tribal issue, I believe that because Siletz News is distributed to people outside the tribe, it's important that I discuss this issue as tribal chairman.

Unlike many other tribes, the Siletz Tribe has a policy that I believe is a very good one. It's obvious to anyone who reads Siletz News that tribal members are given virtually free rein to say just about anything they want to say in their letters to the editor as long as the letters aren't slanderous or obscene.

It's an excellent opportunity for members to express their views about issues confronting the tribe. Most are excellent in that they address tribal issues, with the writers offering valuable perspectives, constructive criticism, and suggestions about our tribal government and administration.

Unfortunately, however, some are letters from disgruntled members who continue to abuse this privilege. They express opinions based on rumors – who themselves are often responsible for the rumors – deliberately or out of ignorance, making statements and accusations that simply are not true and cannot be responded to publicly.

I trust the general public understands that some of the issues are of such a confidential nature – financial or personal – that they cannot appropriately be addressed in a public forum such as Siletz News.

It was for this reason that two years ago, the Tribal Council instituted a confidential newsletter called Nesika Illahee, which is distributed to every adult tribal member by first-class mail every three months. In addition to a great deal of information that is disseminated via Siletz News, tribal members are provided information directly via the confidential newsletter.

We continue to urge our members to read these publications carefully and to contact me, other Council members, or the general manager of the tribe if any questions remain unanswered. I as tribal chairman and the Tribal Council have an obligation to help keep our members accurately and fully informed. At the same time, it's the obligation of every tribal member to seek the facts by carefully reading these newsletters, attending community meetings, and personally contacting tribal officials for reliable information before jumping to conclusions.