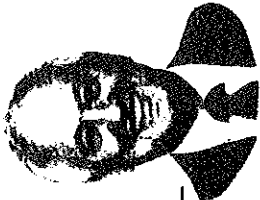


Daily News Opinion



WALLY HICKEL
COMMENT

Note to our governors: Alaskans come first

As Sean Parnell is sworn in today as governor, all Alaskans should wish him well. He has much on his shoulders that can determine the success or failure of Alaska's economy and our quality of life for years to come.

He has announced plans to run for election in his own right next year, and a dozen others are eyeing the job. In the year ahead, it will be up to the Alaska people to decide who is best qualified.

During nearly 60 years of involvement in Alaska politics, I have observed those who wanted to "be Governor" and those who wanted to "do Governor." Some seek the job for personal benefit; others to provide leadership. There's a big difference.

To judge the most qualified, Alaskans have a road map in our constitution. Unlike most U.S. governors, our governor has extraordinary powers including the appointment of all cabinet officers, judges, boards and commissions and the line item veto to edit state spending.

If the Alaska economy is to prosper, our governor can't just be a politician. He or she must be a leader and must govern Alaska not as another state of the union but as an Owner State. That, too, is rooted in our constitution.

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In a keynote address to the Constitutional Convention in 1955, Bob Bartlett, Alaska's delegate to Congress, focused the 55 convention delegates on the need to incorporate in our constitution how to make Alaska economically successful and sustainable.

He told the delegates that if we succeeded in winning 100 million acres in the Alaska Statehood Act (a fight I took on starting in 1952), our constitution must address how to manage and protect those lands and resources.

He warned against two kinds of resource exploitation from Outside: (1) corporations that come, take and leave nothing for the Alaska people, and (2) those who lock up our resources so as not to compete with their holdings elsewhere.

These sobering comments prompted the delegates to write a remarkable Natural Resources Title (Article VIII), the only one like it in the nation. It mandates that the Alaska government must develop and conserve our lands and resources for the "maximum benefit of its people."

In so doing, they created the foundation for our Owner State, a rare combination of commonly owned lands and resources and a democratic political system. And they made it abundantly clear that our governor is pivotal to its success.

As you listen to the candidates in next year's election, don't buy the slogans from the South 48 that don't apply here.

The most important economic issue will be how to get our North Slope natural gas to market. Those candidates who campaign for a "private sector project" have fallen in a trap. That's the last thing we need.

Corporations have their own constituencies, their stockholders. That doesn't make them bad. It's the way business works. But Alaska's governor must ensure that our people are the beneficiaries and must not let the private sector determine our fate.

I had to face this in the 1960s. The oil industry was pulling out of the North Slope when I was elected governor in 1966. I had to force Atlantic Richfield to drill at Prudhoe Bay when they told me they were leaving. "You drill or I will," I warned.

My trump card was the Alaska Constitution: "It's our land and our oil," I explained.

And as interior secretary in 1970 I told Humble Oil (Exxon) that I would tell the American people they were planning to torpedo the trans-Alaska pipeline for their own corporate interest. Our country desperately needed energy and jobs, and the public outrage would have been intense. In both cases, the companies changed course. It was my job to make sure they made decisions that would benefit the needs of the people and not just the bottom line.

With that kind of understanding and intervention both Gov. Parnell and those who follow can truly be successful as governors of our Owner State.

Walter J. Hickel served as governor of Alaska from 1966-1968 and from 1990-1994 and as U.S. secretary of the interior from 1969-1970. Founder of the Institute of the North, his latest book is "Crisis in the Commons: the Alaska Solution." He can be reached at whickel@gci.net.