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Bob Bettisworth

Scott Sterling, interviewer

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Scott Sterling introduces Bob Bettisworth who has been an elected representative from Fairbanks in the Alaska Legislature since 1978. He is now the senior representative in the Interior delegation.

Scott Sterling asked Bob Bettisworth about the House Majority Coalition. Bob Bettisworth said coalitions have come to the forefront in Alaska politics fairly recently. Normally they have had party politics in the legislature. The first coalition, which is a mixture of Democrat and Republican philosophies, first took place in the Alaska Senate a number of years ago. It has been understood by the public that there is a coalition in the Senate and has been for a number of years. The first coalition in the Alaska House took place after the demise of the Republican leadership late in the 1980-81 session. There have been two full sessions under the Republican leadership in a House coalition composed of 20 Republications and six Democrats. The six Democrats broke away and joined the coalition with the Republicans. Bettisworth said they have gotten along very well.

Sterling said the coalition was controversial then and is now involved in controversy two years later. He asked Bettisworth to explain the coalition's side of the events that took place with the confirmation of the governor's appointees and the joint session that was held in June. Bettisworth said he will try to be as short and concise as possible. He said he is happy with the coalition and the actions the coalition has taken. Some of those actions have been suspect by the public. The coalition has had goals. Probably for the first time in the history of the Alaska House Legislature they have had positive, written, publicly announced goals or an agenda to accomplish during their legislative session. The House coalition first priority when they took over two years ago was to try to establish a limit on the session length. Today one of the things the public is most unhappy about is the length of the session. Bettisworth said they just had the second longest session in their history. Even when they weren't in a leadership position in the majority, the Republicans have always submitted legislation for a 120-day session. An advisory vote for a 120-day session was passed overwhelmingly by the voters of Alaska, but ignored by the legislature. The House Republicans felt it had to be a constitutional amendment for a 120-day session to adhere to the demands of the public and if that what is takes then so be it. They have been trying for three years to get the 120-day limit passed through both houses of legislature and this year they accomplished that. It will be on the ballot in November of next year. It calls for a 120-day limit and one 10-day extension by a two thirds vote from each house. He thinks this will help some of the problems they have had in people making a career of the legislative process. Many of them strongly believe that it should be a citizen type of legislature. That is one of the things the coalition accomplished. In addition to that they passed the strongest package of criminal legislation in the twenty-five years since statehood. He believes criminals have forfeited their rights when they commit a crime against society. There is a strong drunk driving bill and they raised the drinking age to 21 years. This will also be on the ballot next year and was also a coalition priority. He talked about other legislation on pornography and drugs.

Sterling asked about the conflict over the governor's confirmation hearings. Bettisworth said he believed the media blew it all out of proportion. In mid-April the House was on schedule for accomplishing budget and bill work for a mid-May adjournment. The Senate was also going along with a mid-May adjournment. At the end of April, the House had substantially completed its budget work and most of its priority legislation. At this time, they had some confrontations with the governor about how to appropriate the capital budget. The allocation had been established a couple of years ago and the governor (Sheffield) was reluctant to go along with it. After much haggling the Senate and the House jointly decided to put together the capital budget. The Senate had already put together four major capital bills. Bettisworth said there were a lot of projects that were unnecessary and they knew would probably not be funded. This excluded almost everything the House thought was necessary so there was a three-way confrontation. Bettisworth said communications broke down because they couldn't agree. The last six weeks of the legislative session were taken up with the formation of a capital budget. The last item on the budget was the University of Alaska which he held out for until the bitter end. He talked about why the House had asserted itself. He feels the House is not treated correctly. There is a greater turnover in the House. He said the Senate has more experienced legislators who know the process inside and out. He talked about certain members of the House in the past getting together with the Senate leadership and going along with what the Senate and the governor wanted. He didn't feel this was proper legislation and not good for the state of Alaska. This year the House decided to be an independent body and work out how the legislation was going to proceed with the Senate on an almost equal basis. He thought the Senate nor the governor believed that they would do that. The House had asked for a joint session to confirm commissioners and for some reason the Senate and the governor did not think the House was not sincere. Bettisworth said the House was definitely sincere. He thought if the joint session had happened the commissioners would have been confirmed. For some reason or another the governor and the Senate convinced themselves that the House was trying to dump all of the governor's appointees which was incorrect. Bettisworth said there was a lot of controversy over the attorney general, but he felt if the vote had come to the floor there wouldn't have been more than six or seven votes against the attorney general. They are constitutionally required to hold hearings and inquire into the background of these people. The Senate side did not hold a confirmation hearing. Bettisworth talked about forcing legislation and using means to that end. He said a couple of the House committees did have some legitimate reasons for holding up hearings. They had asked for information about commissioners that were not submitted. He commented on the illegal confirmation held by the governor and the Senate just three days before the already agreed on session with the House. He talked about their efforts to talk with the governor and the Senate leadership. The House adjourned.

Sterling said there was a joint session after the House was adjourned. Bettisworth said the public chastised the House for not attending that meeting. The House considered it an illegal meeting. He said someone has to stand up and act like constitutional legislators.

Sterling asked about his impressions of the governor. Bettisworth said he likes the governor. They have similar thoughts about where they want the state to go. He hopes they can get together and accomplish the same ideas.

Sterling asked about the legislative pay raise. Some Alaskans are concerned about conflict of interest. Bettisworth said he voted on the pay raise and voted in favor of it. He has opposed pay raises before. He talked about why he voted this way. Ever since he was in the legislature, they have always wanted a citizen legislature. He is convinced that everything that needs to be done in a legislative session can be

done in less than ninety days. He is concerned that there are legislatures who want to extend it solely for the purpose of making their per diem payment and make their year's wages instead of going back to a job in the interim. If the regular pay for legislators is enough then there is no incentive to extend the legislative session because of pay. He feels this will attract better people to stand for election. There will be sufficient monetary return to make the commitment.