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THE FUTURE AND THE FIRST AMERICANS

Remarks of
Commissioner of Indian Affairs Robert L. Bennett
before The National Congress of American Indians
Omaha, Nebraska
September 24 - 27, 1968

It is a pleasure for me as your Commissioner, friend, fellow Indian American, and member of NCAI to provide you with a report of my efforts during the past 29 months. By the way, 29 months is a new record for an Indian Commissioner, as the only other Indian Commissioner, Major Eli Parker, was allowed to serve only 26 months.

No Commissioner has received such wonderful support as you have given me. I want you to know that it is appreciated more than I can say. With this kind of support you have made my job easier, the burdens, cares and worries lighter, and the satisfaction from whatever progress has been made much greater.

Indeed, the past several months have been a time of several "firsts" for the First Americans.

For the first time in history -- in this year 1968 -- a President of the United States sent to Congress a message dealing exclusively with American Indians and the social and economic problems confronting them.

For the first time in history, Indian tribal organizations have begun to take an active part in State and regional economic development planning, so that Indian lands will no longer be surrounded by that invisible barrier that separates reservation economies from growth opportunities with their neighboring communities.

For the first time, Indian people are being afforded a partnership with the Federal Government in Indian affairs.

For the first time, the President in his special message, and the Senate in the passage of S. Con. Res. 11 have taken affirmative action to bury the unilateral termination policies of the 1950's and instead offer new hope to the Indian people that they will be masters of their own fate.

For the first time, the education of Indian children has been given priority attention, not only in terms of dollars expended to quantify it but in terms of brainpower invested in giving it quality, from kindergarten to college. Hopefully there will never be another generation of Indians who suffer a kind of second-class citizenship because of their second-rate schooling.

Most important of all, for the first time in this century the Indian people have rediscovered themselves as a great people and have begun to reestablish cultural and historic identity. We are on the way once again to full command of our own future.

Now, I am providing you the first Commissioner's report to the Indian people. It is my fervent hope that this will set a precedent so that each and every Commissioner of Indian Affairs will come to you regularly and give an accounting of his administration. You are entitled to this.

Because you will have an opportunity to read this report at your leisure, I will not dwell upon it too much this afternoon. If you have any questions, comments, or criticisms, please feel free to write me. I want you to be fully informed and I hope satisfied that we are working together to achieve partnership in reality and in spirit. The spirit of true partnership is that spirit which makes us in the Bureau of Indian Affairs work in partnership with you because we want to and not because someone told us to.

Although we can develop the capability to meet your needs by providing opportunities for adequate food, clothing, and shelter, I feel that you will be satisfied only if you have a voice in the development of these opportunities. I promise you that as long as it is my honor to be your Commissioner, your voice will be heard.

I believe that our greatest progress has been in the changing role of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to meet the changing times. No part of my position gives me more difficulty or more pleasure than that of being your advocate in Government.

I am not unmindful of my obligations to the Federal Government as an executive officer, but I do find a lot of running room to advocate your interests and I use it. I am grateful that Secretary Stewart Udall has supported the Bureau in this role of advocate.

We cannot rest upon our record because we can never be satisfied as long as some of the people are without adequate opportunities to obtain food, clothing and shelter. We can never rest as long as we are confronted with new ideas of concern.

For this reason in particular it is important that we spend time during this convention to analyze certain new issues in Indian affairs that will have a growing and lasting impact upon the ultimate destiny of the Indian people.

These three issues are: The rights of individual Indians under the Constitution of the United States; problems of Indians who are increasingly congregating in off-reservation communities; and, last but hardly least, the young among us.

Each of these issues is a reflection of the fact that the lives of Indians are becoming more and more enmeshed with society as a whole. It is a trend we cannot reverse; and therefore we must help ease the transition so we do not lose.

Civil Rights

The civil rights of American Indians under the Constitution of the United States have been won slowly but not easily. Citizenship has been guaranteed only since 1924. Until the Civil Rights Action of 1964, voting rights of Indians under various State laws were frequently questioned. Job discrimination against Indians existed in many areas of heavy Indian population until equalization of employment opportunities for minorities was further protected by recent Federal law. Most recently, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 gives further protections to the Indian citizenry of this country.

Under the 1968 Act are several titles -- II through VII, to be specific -- pertaining directly to Indians. Title II, for example, provides redress through Federal courts against arbitrary and capricious treatment by tribal authorities in violation of Constitutional rights. Title IV of the Civil Rights Act relates to the assumption by States of criminal and civil jurisdiction over Indian country. It makes a significant change in Public Law 280, 83rd Congress, by requiring consent of the Indian tribe before assumption of jurisdiction by any State not now having such jurisdiction; and it further provides authority for the United States to accept a retrocession of jurisdiction from States which have previously acquired it.

It would appear that the intent of Congress, under this new Act, is to assure uniformity of justice to all Indians while providing the means for a healthy strengthening of tribal law enforcement authority. It calls for a new model code for the few remaining courts under BIA jurisdiction and for the training of judges in such courts. Such a model code, and such professional training, could well be applicable to tribal courts.

We hope that you will join us to render a service to member tribes -- and, conceivably, to other tribes, as well -- by providing leadership to see that in time existing tribal laws will relate to the requirements of the new Civil Rights Act. This concept has taken a long time to be supported by law and we must take the opportunity to make it meaningful.

This organization can also help member tribes obtain fullest benefit from other new legislation: The Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act; and the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act. Both of these laws provide funds for help in improving law enforcement services and in administering justice effectively. These laws qualify Indian tribes for direct participation.

The BIA is ready and willing to help you in this matter.

Off-Reservation Indians

Another issue -- one is which this organization and all tribes must move to find solutions -- is the question of off-reservation Indians. Thousands of Indian people are moving away from reservation communities, sometimes to nearby towns, sometimes to cities some miles distant. Not all of the numbers who are now settling in such diverse places as Rapid City, South Dakota; the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul; Chicago, San Francisco; and Los Angeles are doing so through the BIA's Adult Vocational Training and Employment Assistance services.

The BIA's mission has not extended to Indians who leave the reservation, except to the extent that it provides short-term services for those on reservations who seek BIA help in relocating.

Neither does the BIA mission extend to Indians whose reservation lands are not under Federal trusteeship control. Large pockets of Indian population in northern New York and Maine, for example, are beyond BIA's purview. So are smaller groups scattered along the east coast from Massachusetts to Georgia, and groups in California that have been "terminated."

Indian organizations, therefore, are the hope of these groups. Through your structure and that of your tribes', you can help them to rally public attention to their cause and public aid to alleviate their pressing needs. Through State and local governments, the Federal Government disburses billions of dollars annually for such services as public schooling, health and welfare, development of community projects, and manpower training. The question is: Are the off-reservation Indians, and the Indians on reservations not under trusteeship, getting a fair share of their community's total Federal outlay?

You need also come to grips with the problems which develop in relationships between those of you who live in Indian communities, and those who live away. We are all of one blood, we all have the same basic goals, we are too few to have any political voice unless we are united.

Indians in far away communities are proud of their Indian heritage, have organized themselves because of this common interest, and seek a meaningful relationship with those of you who are in positions of tribal responsibility.

We need to sit down and start discussions that will open the way for understanding between resident and non-resident Indians. I am sure we will find that we have much in common and that most differences can be resolved. We cannot afford the luxury of disunity, so I suggest that the NCAI use its good offices to bring about useful meetings between those who live in Indian communities and those who are away.

Indian Youth

As the forces of change are at work all over the world - and since the reservation is no longer isolated from the rest of society because of T.V., radio, and all communication media, Indian youth is in turmoil over what they see and hear. This turmoil is good if it is founded in the realities of the issues of today. And, the reality of the young Indian people in Indian country is - that they must learn to live in two worlds so as not to become the victims of both. My concern is that Indian young people not become diverted in their quest for meaningful places in society by those elements who are attempting to tear apart the fiber of American lifeways and who see this period of change as a means to achieve leadership through anarchy. Indian young people should not use their youthful energies to burn themselves out in hate and destruction as some young people are doing, but rather they should use these energies in the agonizing search for social justice. They need to look forward with goals in mind - and not backward in anger. To look backward in anger would only perpetuate discontent, provide no basis for revival of Indian spirit, and use of energies which are needed to build a better future.

We need to appraise our relationship with Indian youth before we find ourselves in treacherous waters, - before passion replaces reason, - before slogans replace issues, - before carrying of signs replaces carrying of pride and dignity. We owe them our best efforts because we look to them for the fulfillment of our dreams. They are our prime resources of vitality and new ideas, and our greatest resource.

How do we establish communication between them and us? We need to create an environment for them to speak out with a sense of responsibility and not of futility. We need to provide a forum by which they can make their voices heard on public issues. We need to talk and listen to each other with mutual respect, and the desire for understanding - and we need to make them feel comfortable in this dialogue, but we do not need always to agree with them. We need to understand them. They want to talk to you the Indian leaders - and not to others. The reason I know this is because many, many young people in the last few months have told me this.

We should seek to build and not to destroy - because in seeking to destroy we become our own victims. We need to think and communicate in realistic terms with sincerity as its basis. And, we need to face life in our times. We need to draw upon the past - but not to rest upon it. We need to keep Indian heritage a living thing - and keep it from becoming stagnant. And the only suggestion I could make on the theme for this conference is to have the word "Living" before Indian Heritage because a stagnant or a dead heritage is of no value. Indian youth are coming on us very strong. They are coming on us in large numbers - they are coming on us better educated - they are coming on us more sophisticated. Fifty percent of the general population of this country is approximately 28 years of age and under. These young people as they come on can be a positive force for good, or they can be a negative force for evil - this is our challenge. Indian culture does not provide a place for the young person because in the Indian culture you went from child to man or from child to woman. Wisdom was related to age, and silence among the young was a virtue. But because the minds of our young have been stimulated by education and new experiences, more than ever before they want to know "why?" and we need to answer. They possess everything to build healthy personalities. They have heredity in which they want to take pride - they come from an environment with which they know they must cope - but they know that they alone must accept responsibility for how they respond to the situations that they will be confronted with in daily life. They will have to accept their heredity, cope with their environment, and say to themselves, "Now what shall I do with myself?"

The rate of suicides among younger Indians is greater than the young people in society generally. The rate of suicides among older Indians is lesser than that of older people in society generally. Young Indian people need to find and know themselves. If they don't find themselves they will not be any good to themselves or to anyone else. It could be that we have not provided them with the sources of strength, we have not helped them to see life in proper perspective, and develop values around which to build their lives. We have not taken them into our confidence to give them the recognition they so desperately want. We have not provided them a means by which they can see that they will ever derive a sense of fulfillment. We must see to it that they get the opportunity to build our Indian heritage anew and help keep it living and great; so they can live wholesome lives in the image of man and God.

But, we must start now, because today is already too late for some, and tomorrow will be too late for others. You can do this. In my experience, living on the reservation, going to school, with Indian young people, and 35 years of work among you I've developed an unshakable faith and abiding confidence in Indian people. I know you can rise to this challenge as you have risen to challenges in the past. I look to you for ideals, for goals and for inspiration. I am proud of the restraint and dignity that you have shown in this period of our history.

I am very optimistic for the Indian future because of the leadership that we have and is currently emerging among Indian people both young and adult. I am proud to be one of you.