Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce today announced his support of the Iroquois League and the Onondaga Nation of New York State in their efforts to have the sacred wampum belts returned to their proper place and preserved in the tribes' possession.

The Commissioner pledged his support following a meeting in his office with a 12-member delegation of Iroquois tribal leaders. The wampums, sacred belts of historic religious importance to the Iroquois League of New York, have been kept in the New York State Museum at Albany since they were taken from the tribes in 1898.

“I strongly urge the New York State Legislature to repeal the Custody of Wampums Law,” Commissioner Bruce declared. “As a member of the Mohawk Tribe, which is a part of the Iroquois League, I know the deep feelings that all Iroquois attach to the wampums."

The Onondagas hold the religious office of Keepers of the Wampum in the Iroquois League. Since the belts were removed from their custody in 1898, they have made numerous attempts to regain possession. Their initial legal effort failed because the State court did not recognize their right to sue.

A bill was introduced in the last session of the New York Legislature to modify the statutes of the wampum belts, but it was not enacted.

Commissioner Bruce continued: "We existed as a people long before the coming of the white man. Were it not: for the Iroquois the French would have won the struggle for North America, since it was the strong protection given the English by the Iroquois League that enabled them to survive.”

The Commissioner also noted that the wampum belts have a recognized religious significance to all the -member tribes of the Iroquois League, and that they are integral parts of the religious ceremonies conducted by the tribes; therefore, “The return of these belts involves a principle more precious to American freedom than any other -- the freedom to practice one's religion without interference from any government body. The continued possession of the belts by the State museum limits the religious freedom of my people, and for that reason I urge their prompt return. “

The wampum belts issue was among others discussed by Commissioner Bruce and members of his Washington staff during a day-long series of meetings with the New York delegation today. The Commissioner indicated his willingness to provide federally recognized tribes in New York with Bureau of Indian Affairs cooperation.

Bruce discussed with the group the services that New York State is presently offering to the tribes. He said the Bureau would not supplant these services but rather would provide complementary services, primarily in the technical assistance area.

The Commissioner also pointed out that the Indians have lacked the unity to obtain many services in the past. He declared: "We must stand united in order to obtain the services and programs which are due to the Indian people.

The delegation lunched on Capitol Hill with members of the New York Congressional delegation, including Representatives Henry p. Smith, Ogden R. Reid, and Robert C. McEwen.

Tribal chiefs and leaders in the delegation included Chief Franklin Patterson, Cayuga; Chiefs Robert Burr, Jr. and Jacob Thompson, Oneida; Chiefs Irvin Powless, Jr. and Leon Shenandoah, Onondaga; Chief John Cook, Mohawk; Barry Snyder, treasurer, and Hrs. Cheryl Barney, clerk, Seneca;, Chiefs Corbett Sundown and Beeman Logan, Tonawanda; and Chiefs Arnold Hewitt and Leo Henry, Tuscarora.