Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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Our American society as a whole has assumed new dimensions within the past few years. The place of minority groups has been redefined -- or, rather the inherent rights of citizens, whatever racial minority groups they may represent have been reinforced. But civil rights remain only theoretical as long as economic exclusion continues. This is frequently the situation in localities where American Indians constitute a significant and socially conspicuous minority.

Life among Indians today is often far more cruel than was the simple and primitive struggle of their ancestors for survival against the forces of nature. They are a people surrounded by a value system they must grope to comprehend because it is a value system that differs basically from their own tradition.

Indians are generally oriented to the here and-now, while the dominant culture is motivated by planning for the future. Beyond the cultural outlook is also the difference in economic outlook between Indian people accustomed to a consumption economy and a people dependent upon a production economy. Still another factor contributes to the aloofness of Indians, especially the older ones: they still remember the bitter history of the 19th Century and find it incompatible with their experience to regard America’s expansion era as glorious.

Alienated because of their cultural background Indians are further alienated by their economic circumstance, and the alienation is accentuated by the attitude of the dominant cultural group toward people who are both poor and "different.”

As President Johnson has also said: "This Nation will never be great until all the people are part of it.

Most Indians are still outsiders to much of the social, economic and political life of this Nation.

But today's generation of Indians have found their voice, and demand to be heeded. They are expecting to be recognized as a minority group of citizens with all the rights of social and economic choice enjoyed by the majority. They are looking more in the direction of political and social action than ever before and many are making their way in the once alien circle of State politics. They are looking to playing a role in the determination of their own destinies within the States and local communities in which they reside.

Inroads have been made on squalid housing, but still most Indians live in substandard dwellings, a threat to health and human decency. Typically, the young rural Indian adult has about two-thirds as much schooling as the average Americana Out of a work force of probably 100,000, about 40,000 are chronically unemployed.

Some of you are now saying to yourselves: "Yes, Indian policies of the Federal Government have failed to help the Indian people.

This may, in part, be true but I believe that part of the trouble lies in the fact that States and local communities have consistently taken the attitude that Indians are a “Federal problem,” wholly and exclusively.

With the great financial contributions that States are receiving from the Federal Government for schools, roads, health programs, water, housing -- to name only the most obvious -- it is difficult to understand how community planning can continue to exclude consideration of the needs, as well as the resources, of the Indian segment.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has been engaged in a struggle that has been, at best, one of holding the line against greater Indian poverty as the Nation rides higher and higher crests of economic prosperity. The greatest single obstacle is the fact that we must often work with Indian groups in isolation from, rather than in relationship with, each other and the total community.

It is no exaggeration to say that Indian expectations for the future are inseparably interwoven with the need for total community and regional planning, with a keen eye to social as well as economic factors in all plans.

Spottily, in some places, State and local communities are now involving Indian resources in total planning. One of the conspicuous examples that comes to my mind is that of the commercial-industrial-educational-recreational development planning under way in the general vicinity of Phoenix. I think particularly of the Gila River Pima Indians, who have joined with neighboring cities to draw on all Federal, State and local resources, public and private, to take fullest advantage of the growth pattern of the region.

There are other examples, in other Western States, of this new trend.

But, generally speaking, the comments Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall made in 1966 to the Western Governors' Conference still hold true. Let me quote:

"Few States have acted to encourage the development of Indian resources"

Few States have even recognized -- much less done anything about -- the special education needs of Indian youngsters. Few States have really encouraged Indians to participate fully in their political life; and many have been indifferent much of the time toward the general welfare of their Indian citizens I am not suggesting that all of the Federal Government's responsibilities toward Indians should now be shifted to the States. I am intimating that most of the States have done too little too late to aid the cause of Indian development Some States, worse, have missed what I believe to be the main point -- that the economy of every State will be strengthened as the Indians are helped to develop their human and natural resources to the maximum."

On the credit side of State intentions is the fact that there are now 19 States which have established official bodies to study Indian affairs and keep the Governors informed.

Also on the credit side is the fact that these State commissions and advisory groups are not reticent to point up Indian needs. Let me quote from a random sampling of such reports:

From the 1966 Handbook of Indians issued by the Wisconsin Governor's Commission on Human Rights come these data In 1966, the per capita income on the 10 Wisconsin Indian reservations was less than $750., In proportion to their numbers, more Indian than white students drop out of high school before graduation and at the heart of the dropout problem is the prevalence of poverty among those who do not continue in school. And a telling further comment: "It is easy to prescribe greater industrial and resource development and additional vocational and educational training, but to see this translated into

action is not easy."

From California's Governor's Advisory Commission on Indian Affairs:

''There are indications that the education of the Indian is not of the same quality as that of the non-Indian in the California public schools. Three times as many Indians as non-Indians drop out of school. Many others are graduated with inferior education because of lack of teacher concern or the failure of the school system to devise compensatory teaching techniques to cope with the students of differing cultural backgrounds."

And from Nevada's Indian Affairs Commission: "The success of programs concerning Nevada Indians requires an understanding and careful interpretation of the Indian point of view."

Even in these brief excerpts of reports from three States, representing diverse situations with respect to their Indian populations, it is not difficult to discern the common expression of need for a new ingredient in State programs for Indians. And that ingredient is attention to the special needs, the peculiar needs, of a group of people whose culture and lifeways differ from the average American pattern. Failure to take their differences into account or rather, failure to recognize the fundamental aspects of their differences -- has resulted in defeat of attempts to provide meaningful assistance.

Education policies may be considered a core cause why Indians have failed to become participating citizens in many American communities Two-thirds or more of all Indian children attend public schools. As the California report states -- and it echoes the situation in many other places -- the schools are not, in most cases, providing the necessary services to help Indians make a successful transition into our competitive American society.

I would not venture to recommend the nature of school programs, except to emphasize the language difficulties which often pyramid for Indian children as the grade level and subject matter load increases. Compensatory and remedial programs are not only desirable; they are often necessary.

Education for successful living - which includes successful employment -is the single most important gift we can bequeath our children. It is the single most severe punishment we can inflict upon them to deny them access to the best tools of learning. They cannot fly like eagles on the wings of wrens.

We would do well to consider the generic meaning of the word "education" because sometimes I fear it has been forgotten in the jargon of the profession. Education programs should draw out the best in each child to lead each one by his own special light into the joyous experience of self-awareness, self-expression and self-confidence.

If we accomplish this end for our Indian children, then one day it will no longer be necessary for us to meet periodically to discuss Indian problems.

Yet education programs are not to be construed as something apart from bread-and-butter problems. Food, housing, jobs -- these are the everyday needs of Indians as well as other Americans. Textbooks are not substitutes for soup and meat. Education is preventive medicine against another generation of hungry people, but it is no cure for the child who enters the classroom in the morning with hunger pains in his stomach.

And so I urge that the American Indian segment of the population in your States be regarded within the

context of your economic planning as well as your social planning. Make room for them in the job market. Otherwise the burden of their continuing poverty will be forever a drain on your communities.

The Federal Government should be remembered as one strong rallying point for your efforts. There are at least 20 different Federal agencies that provide financial aid to States and local communities to help in both human and resource development. Education and training, medical care and environmental health, road-building and construction of new community facilities to encourage commerce, housing aid and food for the needy -- these are only some of the most obvious areas of Federal aid. All are intended to be components of a total effort to uplift the social and economic climate of American communities across the country.

It is difficult to understand the desultory attitude of some States and communities toward the potential human and land resources which the American Indian segment could contribute, if an honest effort were made to include them in the planning.

To facilitate economic development endeavors in which Indian tribes or individuals would participate jointly with non-Indian interests, Congress is now considering a dramatic new proposal. We call it the Indian Resources Development Act. The most far-reaching proposal of its kind in many years, it loosens the regulatory shackles that have hindered maximum development of Indian-owned resources. Among other provisions, it calls for creation of a $500 million Indian development loan fund with Federal guaranties (providing up to $100 million annually for approved loans); and it paves the way for establishment of corporately structured Indian economic development bodies.

The main purpose of the bill is to provide Indians with managerial, credit and corporate tools to enable them to participate more fully in American economic, social, educational and political life; and to permit them to exercise greater initiative and self-determination.

Such legal tools are necessary for maximum Indian development -- but equally necessary is the interested response of the outer community.

This organization of Governors' Indian Councils can help tremendously to quicken acceptance of Indians into the mainstream of community life.

Through your organization you can call public attention to areas of neglect.

Through your organization you can propose realistic plans affecting Indians for the consideration of your State legislatures and your State agencies concerned with health, education, welfare and economic development.

Through your organization you can bring Indian people a new degree of understanding of the inherent opportunities for them in becoming involved in community affairs; and you can offer the guidance that will make their participation constructive in its character.

Through your organization you can bring a third dimension to the Federal State partnership in the war on poverty by stimulating people-to-people action on the local scenes.

In short and in sum, let us all work in accord to raise the aspirations of Indians beyond the poverty-oriented level. By so striving, we will all come closer to realizing the hope of a secure American society.