Remarks by Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce at A Dinner Meeting of Western Oklahoma Indian Leaders Oklahoma City, Okla., October 24,, 1969

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Our Bible history tells us that Noah and his ark were on the stormy seas for 40 days and 40 nights before the waters receded.

I can tell you -- I think I know what life on that ark must have been. This is my 40th day as skipper of another ark, the Bureau of Indian Affairs. We did not have the time to scrape the barnacles off her hull before we were hit by Hurricane Teddy, battered a bit by Hurricane Wendell, and sprayed again with a lot of salt by the militants, at the NCAI Conference in Albuquerque.

It's been a tough voyage from Albuquerque to Oklahoma City -- but one thing is certain: We're ready to put strong wind into our sails so we can keep ahead of future storms. Such thoughts led me to decide to speak out here to you in the heart of a great Indian area where the issues are understood and vitally alive. My message is directed to Indian people everywhere.

There's one big fear we can put aside from now on. At the NCAI meeting, Vice President Agnew, speaking as Chairman of the National Council on Indian Opportunity, said plainly:

The President's statement, delivered to the last NCAI convention in Omaha, still stands. This Administration opposes termination. This Administration favors the continuation of the trust relationship and the protection of Indian lands and Indian resources." This position was reiterated by Secretary Hickel at that Convention. This Administration will present a united front in opposing termination threats which have so severely damaged the Federal/Indian relationship these past 19 years.

How do we make the trust relationship more responsive and more flexible, so that it can meet the human needs of the Indian people? So that it is more effective in developing the maximum productivity from the rich natural resources to be found on Indian lands? So that we can eliminate the scars of poverty from Indian communities and Indian faces?

Indian involvement in decision-making is the only means by which this can be done and assured. I mean legitimate, formal, recognized, grass-roots Indian participation. I mean the kind of participation in which all tribal members turn out to vote on issues of concern at the local/regional, and national levels. I mean the kind of participation in which Indians volunteer and have opportunity to render their services on committees in their communities -- school boards, recreation and economic planning committees, social service committees, and such other activities as relate to your everyday lives.

It's going to require close liaison, working together to make sure that the proper groundwork is laid this

kind of Indian participation. It is the kind of local action which Vice President Agnew asked for in his NCAI address.

We in Washington have spent the past 40 days examining the present structure of BIA to see how it can be adjusted to make more room for Indian input. We want to be sure that any conflicting lines of authority are eliminated. We want to be sure that funds are not frittered away through duplications of expenditures and for unnecessary purposes. And above all, we want to make sure that Indian betterment, rather than political expedient, becomes the basis for changes we will be making.

It would be no great problem, I assure you, to create a new organizational structure for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It is a process that pockmarks Bureau history. I agree that changes are needed in the organizational structure of the Bureau. But, I also believe that the methodology used in reorganization in the past is as much of a problem as the problems that were being corrected.

Meaningful, legitimate, Indian directed and controlled involvement in these processes is not there -- it can't be there -- and it won't be there effective mechanisms for it to work are provided. As it is, Indians have been "used" to legitimatize the processes of bureaucracy.

I do not intend to fall into this trap. I do not believe that Indian people want to travel down the same old road again. I do not believe they will accept it. And I intend to provide the leadership required to ensure that changes are made in the processes associated with Indian administration and its policies that will ensure productive Indian participation under the test of time.

We Indians have been demanding the privilege of full involvement, and an opportunity to plan programs for our own destiny and that of our children for many years now.

The time has come for that to take place. I want to make it clear that the Bureau of Indian Affairs under my direction has no intention of laying out the decisions for you. I want non-Indians to stop telling us what is wrong, what to do, and how it should be done. We are as capable of deciding issues that affect us as are they -- but we the Indian people must take the initiative.

I've recently been accused of not exerting strong leadership -- of lacking a certain aggressiveness. I ask those who raise these questions -- why? Why should they want me, a Federal official, to exert strong and forceful leadership in your affairs?

I sense that those making these pronouncements do not seek any fundamental change in Indian administration -- that they are "hung up," as solidly as many of the "bureaucrats" they freely criticize, on the system as it has been administered during the past 140 years or so. Can this be true? Only you as members of the American Indian community have the answer.

For my part, I intend to provide strong leadership in my Bureau's activities. That leadership will be directed toward making the Bureau totally responsive and flexible to the needs and direction of Indian people, and as supportive of Indian effort and expression as is possible. I will help you put this thing together, not dictate its terms.

Where are we headed in the immediate future? We are not standing idle. Every stone is being turned to expose that method that can best serve to install legitimate, formalized recognized, Indian involvement in all activities of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, at all levels on a continuing basis. This requirement carries top priority and no other action will be taken until this is accomplished, whether we speak of

reorganization, major policy questions and issues, or school operations. Indian participation and direction in all activities will be standard operating procedure in the Bureau from this day forth.

We may be able to bring this about through administrative action. But, to guarantee that its role will have the necessary legitimate recognition and authority, it may be necessary to secure legislation. We are prepared to seek legislation if that is what is required to put this over.

Indian people will be consulted on this, the most important move of all, in the near future. After that decision is made, the ball will be in your hands. All resources available under my administration will be organized and marshalled toward assistance to you and your people. But you must provide the direction: you must step out in leadership; and you must be ready and willing to accept the responsibility that comes with this leadership.

This is the age of youth -- I believe in it. It should be. They represent the majority of the Indian population, and the whole American population for that matter. Their destinies are the ones at stake when we make decisions. I have already begun to make changes in BIA to give Indian youth a chance for constructive participation. I expect Indian leadership to do this also. The recent NCAI action establishing a youth council is a fine example of this. It is amazing to me how much young, educated talent can be found by just a little searching. I've already uncovered some of it, and the search is on for more and more.

The work before us will not be accomplished in the next 40 days. Depending on our perseverance, and the presentation of a united front for action in these efforts, Indian people can be in command of their destinies in the next 40 months.

We have to live with certain realities. One of them is the fact that a new way of life is being imposed upon all the people of this country, not just Indians -- a way of life that has been molded by science and technology; a way of life that we cannot turn back, and which we can control only it we work at it.

It is obvious that BIA cannot and should not do all the developing. For one thing, it does not have the authority for, nor any business in, regulating all aspects of Indian life. For another -- Indians don't need any more authorities imposed upon them. What Indians need is more authority to make their own decisions.

At the NCAI conference in Albuquerque, Senator Kennedy proposed a White House Conference on Indian Affairs, which was then endorsed by an NCAI resolution. I shall support the action of the NCAI and provide whatever support and assistance I can from the resources at my command.

A White House-sponsored conference is not a new idea. It was first proposed in 1956, as a follow-up to the first national Indian housing conference and the first national Indian youth conference. It would have stature if sponsored by the White House. But -- why couldn't it be a White House sponsored conference which is planned, organized, and run by Indians, and in which the participants are Indians, not just other people who have hopped on the Indian bandwagon? A conference about Indians suggests more paternalism in a new guise. A conference for Indians, by Indians, would keynote the new politics -- Indian Affairs directed by Indians.

I didn't accept the job as Commissioner because I wanted to be a big chief. Nor did I take it on as a ceremonial climax to my career. I accepted the job because I believe, there is a desperate need for something to be done, and because I want to be able to see to it that it is done the way Indians want it

done. Let no one mistake the seriousness of my commitment.

My way is not the flamboyant way. I do not wave my arms or pound fists on podiums. I do not speak in glittering phrases. I do not employ catch phrases to catch the headlines. I do not shout. I do not wish to engage in or participate in power-struggles because I do not wish to be party to further fractionation of the Indian community and its interests. If Indians are divided, then Indian aspirations will be defeated.

There are issues on which all of us agree -- just as there are times when we disagree. But a united front must be maintained -- no one has put this any better than did Wendell Chino in his keynote address at the NCAI convention. If we can agree on major issues -- then we will experience a new stature on the American scene. We will discover the politicians following Indian directions, not trying to lead or use Indians in the manner of the past.

I thank you sincerely for your time and attention. I hope to have many, many more opportunities to discuss these matters with each of you in the future. Your views are always welcome and I invite your questions and your suggestions.

Thank you.