# At the 25th Anniversary Convention of the National Congress of American Indians Albuquerque, New Mexico, October 9, 1969

**Media Contact:** Nedra Darling, OPA-IA Phone: 202-219-4152
**For Immediate Release:** October 9, 1969
Print PDF

President Chino, Vice Presidents, and friends. I am especially happy to be here at the 25th Anniversary Convention of the National Congress of American Indians.

In the past I have joined you around the table as one of the charter members of the National Congress of American Indians. Our efforts then were to develop a forceful voice for the American Indians and to work to improve the legal, economic, and social conditions of our people. Today, I come as your Commissioner of Indian Affairs. The intensive efforts which you need to make and which I need to pursue are more pressing now than at any time in our history.

I have accepted the challenge of being the Commissioner of Indian Affairs fully realizing the tremendous task which I have undertaken. As Commissioner I want to get Indians fully involved in the decisions affecting their lives; then to get the Bureau of Indian Affairs to be totally responsive to Indian needs; and to develop a climate of understanding throughout the United States which will permit the full development of Indian people and their communities without the threat of termination. All of these tasks are of equal importance and must be pursued with diligence and at once.

I want to underscore, at this point, that I accepted the appointment of Commissioner, with the commitment and understanding that this administration was not going to become a termination administration and that I would have the fullest high-level cooperation in my efforts to reorganize the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I have been given these assurances.

Secretary Hickel strongly emphasized this in his speech last night, and Assistant Secretary Loesch has stated publicly on several occasions that this is not a termination administration.

Indians have had a unique relationship with the Federal Government since its inception. The core of this relationship has been the trust status of Indian lands. Because of the existence of the "Trust Land Status", Indian tribes have continued to exist and provided some degree of continuity for their culture and some identity for their members.

I, like you, hold this trust sacred, not just because I am an Indian who has invested much time and effort to protect it, but also because I believe sound government policy dictates this view as derived from the Federal treaties, public laws, and court opinions.

We propose to undertake an extensive study of the Federal trust relationship to make it a more flexible instrument for Indian development while fully protecting Indian resources. I will invite Indian people, as well as other experts in Indian law; corporation law; and property law, to assist us in defining the best

way to obtain this flexibility. This means a new role for the agency will become necessary to serve you.

Beginning with the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, services available to all other citizens, in some measure, began to apply to Indians. Particularly since 1934, the landmark legislation enacted by the Congress, which resulted in the many new social and economic development programs to assist the disadvantaged, have been of benefit to Indian citizens. They have derived benefit from these programs, not so much on the basis of their being Indians, but more on the basis of their being citizens in need, who by most standards qualify for such programs.

In the 1970 fiscal year, it is estimated that the combined expenditures of all Federal agencies assisting Indian people will be approximately $500 million dollars. At least one-half of these monies will come from agencies outside the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The dramatic increase in kinds and levels of services from the Federal Government has had an extensive impact upon the lives of Indian people as well as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and has contributed to more meaningful and comfortable lives for thousands of Indians.

Yet as far as I can determine to date, the organizational structure and personnel deficiencies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs have prevented it from helping Indians organize to get optimum Indian utilization of this new array of programs and services.

The Department of Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs will seek to serve as a spearhead for developing other agency programs for Indians. It is our intent to stimulate, facilitate, and support the direct involvement and planning between the Indian people and other agencies and departments.

What I have in mind, is the development of a strong intergovernmental relations unit in the Washington office of BIA. This office will take the initiative and work with other agencies and departments, to insure that old as well as new programs, are designed to meet Indian needs. This unit also will work with Regional and State offices, and local tribal groups to assure that Indians are getting their fair share of these programs.

This means the Bureau staff must work aggressively at the local level with tribal groups, State agencies, and Federal and regional counterparts to develop and assist in implementing a viable plan for the development of Indian communities and people. If Bureau funds are minimal and the community needs are maximum, our staff will be expected to search out additional program monies from other public or private sources.

What I am emphasizing is the fact that a primary role for the Bureau staff will be to improve the conditions of American Indian people by utilizing resources from the public as well as private sectors.

Under our administration, the thrust of the Bureau will be to advocate and create improved conditions of Indian life and to activate Indian involvement in all matters affecting their lives.

In order to do this, we must have a Bureau of Indian Affairs structure, from headquarters to the agency level, which will support and direct the development of this role.

I have taken the initial step by first attempting to pull my own team together. At this point, I have sent forward a number of names of persons who would join me in my efforts to restructure the Bureau. Among the names are a number of persons whom you know and respect as Indians and who have a long

history of fighting for our Indian rights. I would welcome any suggestion you have about appointments at all levels within the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

I have had an opportunity to talk extensively with many of you here at this convention, and you have given me many good ideas about how to undertake a plan of restructuring. I shall certainly follow your good advice and counsel.

I can pledge to you, that we will do everything in our power to make the Bureau a more flexible organization which will be responsive to Indian needs.

In restructuring the Bureau of Indian Affairs, I should not like to commit myself to any particular method of operation we will be using an internal working group on the immediate matter of redirecting Bureau functions and staff roles. On the broader issues of policy affecting Indian people, I shall call together Indian persons and Indian groups as well as other persons to look at specific issues which need new direction and new definition. Areas like education from pre-school throughout adulthood; tribal governments; the basic rights of Indian people and legal services, the development of economically viable Indian communities; the identification of methods to make the broad range of community services available to Indian people; ways to enhance the development and creation of community institutions, and Indian control of such institutions; improved use of heirship lands, and a true look at Indian heritage, accomplishments, and contributions.

One of my special interests is Indian youth. They are the largest and fastest growing segment of our Indian population, and our greatest asset for the future of Indian people. Over the years, we have made great strides in education and training but we have also ignored many of the pressing problems that come about as our communities change. For example, many of our young people are growing up without homes or communities. We need to look at this and find ways for them to feel more secure in their development and environment. We will be looking towards new and different alternatives of education not only for the very young, but also on the secondary post-graduate, and graduate levels. To help in these plans, I am forming a special youth advisory committee responsible to my office. As we form our other committees, advisory groups, and task forces, young people will be asked to serve as an important part of these.

We will be asking a number of young Indian people to work with us in bringing insights and understanding to their problems.

No one person can hope to achieve the many things I have talked to you about. It will require negotiations and building of relationships and commitments to Indian people and their future and by we the Indian people for our future. In a sense, an Indian Commissioner is a tightrope walker, he must look clearly at the goal of improving the conditions of Indian people, the trust relationship and protecting and developing the natural resources and water rights of our people. To do all this, the Indian Commissioner must operate as a part of the governmental process bouncing on the tightrope, and yet, keeping his feet firm, his eye sharp, and maintaining the cooperation and support of this entire process and the Indian people.

You are my biggest asset in this job. I intend to maintain and continue open dialogue with Indian interest organizations, like NCAI, as well as Indian tribes and individual Indian people, so that on the difficult issues, I will have Indian understanding and support.

We invite you to join us as full partners in discussing, planning, and implementing programs and

services to improve all the facets of Indian life.

President Nixon has pledged that "progress through participation on the part of the Indians is now the basis of this administration's efforts to make progress in every area of Indian affairs." Secretary Hickel also has underscored this pledge and I am determined that my performance as your Commissioner will warrant your confidence, patience, and support in achieving a program which will be beneficial to all of us.

---