

Nixon Presses Interior Agency To Reform Policies on Indians

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 28— Pressed by President Nixon, Department of the Interior officials are moving to make major policy changes in the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The changes will also include personnel practices and probably some realignment of personnel. These are aimed at giving Indians a greater voice in their own affairs and overcoming the bureaucracy that Indians believe is stifling their efforts for greater self-determination.

The decisions, which will probably be forthcoming within a week, will be subject to Mr. Nixon's personal approval. He will also answer, according to officials, a demand by tribal chiefs that the Indian Bureau be moved out of the Interior Department and into the White House.

The intensive, high-level conferences between Interior officials and the White House, stemmed from the continuing and growing conflict with Indian leaders and young Indian activists over reforms in the bureau.

It was not yet clear how sweeping the changes would be, but informed officials described them as in "major areas." A review of the situation will be held with President Nixon, probably tomorrow.

By stepping into the fight, Mr. Nixon appeared to confirm reports that he wished to quiet the conflict and ease political pressures.

Democrats in Congress have been telling Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton and others that the Administration has failed to serve the Indians and was engaged in a deliberate campaign to carry on the paternalism that has marked the bureau.

Mr. Nixon informed a group of Western editors last Saturday in Portland that he had told Secretary Morton that "we should take a look at the whole bureaucracy with regard to the handling of Indian affairs and shake it up, shake it up good."

The President blamed the bureaucracy for Indian problems, saying that "the bureaucracy feeds on itself, defends itself and fights for the status quo. And does very little, in my opinion, for progress in the field."

The Indian Commissioner, Louis R. Bruce, appears secure in his post. He has sought to make some fundamental changes in the bureau but has been thwarted by old-line bureaucrats and Republican pressures stemming from personnel changes he wants in field offices.

The major targets of Indians have been the Deputy Indian Commissioner, John O. Crow, whom Mr. Morton named to provide what the Secretary said was a stronger administration

of the bureau.

Indians, however, regard Mr. Crow as an old-line bureaucrat who was named without consultation with Indian leaders. The same applies to Miss Wilma Victor, who is Mr. Morton's assistant for Indian affairs.

The decision expected within a week covers the following major fields:

Personnel practices: This area involves giving qualified Indians preference for employment in top-level positions and throughout the bureau. Indian preference is set in law but has been buried for years. The bureau has contended that the preference law applies only to initial hirings and not to promotions for higher posts.

F. Browing Pipestem, a young Indian lawyer directed by Commissioner Bruce to do research on the issue, discovered that in 1947 the Interior Department's solicitors' office had ruled that the law applied to all vacancies in the bureau.

CONTRACTS: Indian tribes have complained that contracting with the tribes to take over services previously provided to them by the bureau has been halted by bureaucrats. This dispute involves an old law under which some officials believe the bureau does not have the authority to make some contracts covering such things as housing development, educational and welfare programs and water resources management. The Nixon Administration may seek legislation to broaden the contracting authority.