

American Indian Activists Winning Bureau Reform

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8—President Nixon's doctrine of self-determination for the American Indian is finally moving toward implementation after a long and bitter power struggle within the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

That struggle has apparently ended in victory for the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Louis R. Bruce, and for the "fearless fourteen," a group of young Indian activists brought in by Mr. Bruce to galvanize a complacent and predominantly white bureaucracy.

The decline and fall of the bureaucrats entrenched in an agency responsible for the well-being of the Indians since 1824 began 18 months ago when Mr. Nixon sent a message to Congress saying that Indians, not "outsiders," ought to be running the Federal programs directly serving Indians.

The bureaucrats did not give up without a fight. Early attempts at reform were frustrated so long by the stalling tactics of senior officials that some impatient Indians began calling the new commissioner "Bruce the Goose" and "the Indian from Greenwich Village."

At first glance Mr. Bruce did not seem a likely innovator of radical change. Although his father was a Mohawk and his mother an Oglala Sioux, Mr. Bruce in his dark conservative suits and fraternity pin looked more like a Madison Avenue executive than an Indian. In fact, he was vice president of a New York advertising firm

Continued on Page 45, Column 1



The New York Times

Louis R. Bruce examining Indian mask in his office.

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

and a gentleman farmer who lived in Greenwich Village and spent weekends on a 400-acre dairy farm near Cooperstown, N. Y.

But he had kept up with Indian problems. He was a mainstay of the National Congress of American Indians, which he helped establish as the leading Indian lobby in Washington. And he was one of the few Republican Indians extant. So, Mr. Nixon appointed him commissioner in 1969.

Mr. Bruce's early modest attempts to reinvigorate the bureau were supported by the then Secretary of the Interior, Walter J. Hickel. But after Mr. Hickel's dismissal by President Nixon on grounds of "mutual lack of confidence," the new Secretary, Rogers C. B. Morton, looked coldly on reform and gave ear to the embattled bureaucrats and their allies, a group of conservative tribal chiefs who complained that Mr. Bruce was packing the bureau with young "red power" militants.

Diluted His Power

Last July Secretary Morton tried to dilute the power of Mr. Bruce by appointing as Deputy Indian Commissioner an old-line official, John O. Crow, a Cherokee from Oklahoma. Mr. Crow was given sole power to redelegate authority, including that reserved for Mr. Bruce.

Mr. Crow moved swiftly against the activists. He replaced Leon F. Cook as acting director of economic development and ordered him transferred to Denver to participate in a study of Western water resources. Mr. Cook, a Red Lake Chippewa and one of the original "fearless fourteen," resigned in disgust, charging a conspiracy by the Interior and Justice Departments to "destroy the Indian community." In November he was elected president of the National Congress of American Indians.

A similar attempt by Mr. Crow to transfer William H. Veeder, a non-Indian lawyer and an outspoken and controversial advocate of Indian water rights, stirred the tribes to wrath.

Tribal leaders saw these actions as part of a general retreat from President Nixon's explicit endorsement of Indian self-determination. Thirteen months had passed since the President outlined to Congress his "historic step forward in Indian policy."

In that time, the Indians noted, there was "much thunder but little rain," and while they were pleased with the restoration of the sacred Blue Lake to the Taos Pueblo Indians—they conceded that the bill returning the 48,000-acre tract would never have passed the Senate without the intervention of the White House—action was slow on other proposals.

In September, a group of tribal chiefs headed by Peter McDonald, chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, descended on Washington with a request that the Indian Affairs Bureau be removed from the Department of the Interior and placed in "receivership" in the White House. Mr. McDonald told a news conference that forces within the Interior Department were sabotaging reforms envisioned by the President.

Simultaneously a band of young militants invaded the bureau and attempted a citizens' arrest of Mr. Crow. Mr. Crow was not in. The Indians barricaded themselves inside an office and were forcibly ejected by the police.

'Shake It Up Good'

These demonstrations brought a quick reaction from Mr. Nixon. There was a series of high-level conferences between Interior officials and the White House. "Shake it up, shake it up good," was the President's advice to Secretary Morton on the agency's bureaucracy.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Bruce had been restored to full power. By November he was able to announce that his team of activists had taken over key jobs at top echelon. Mr. Veeder's transfer was rescinded. Ernest Stevens, an Oneida from Wisconsin, and Alexander McNabb, a Micmac from Maine, have emerged as Mr. Bruce's chief lieutenants and innovators.

Thus, after more than two years of bureaucratic in-fighting, the agency's new team was at last free to show what it could do for the nation's most deprived and isolated minority.

The President had called for a "new and coherent strategy." Commissioner Bruce was convinced from the start that the old strategy of relocating Indians in the cities had failed miserably. So, instead of shipping young reservation Indians to job training centers in distant cities, he proposed that the \$40-million employment assistance program be centered on the reservation for the development of a local labor force. "Relocation is dead," said one of his aides.

There are no jobs on the reservations now, so Mr. Bruce's next objective was to start developing "truly viable Indian economic systems."

Developing an Indian economy did not mean bringing in white industries that were only looking for cheap Indian labor, he said. It meant the creation of Indian-owned services, so that a dollar earned on the reservation would stay there instead of being sucked out by white cities like Gallup, N.M., he explained.

There would be Indian carpenters, Indian plumbers, Indian

electricians, even Indian bankers, he said.

"I want to see Indians buying cars from an Indian dealer and having them serviced there," he told an Indian manpower conference in Tulsa, Okla., Dec. 8. "I want to see Indians buying food at an Indian food market where the food has been brought in Indian trucks from Indian food distributors. I want to see houses built by Indian construction companies on designs by Indian architects."

For 15 Enterprises

Meanwhile, the tribes were being encouraged to come up with comprehensive economic development plans. The Standing Rock (North Dakota) Sioux, for example, have submitted a plan for 15 enterprises, including a bank, a motel, a shopping center and a cattle ranching operation.

The Navajos started operating their own telephone system a year ago. The Pine Ridge (South Dakota) Sioux, angry at the sight of white contractors building houses for Indians on a reservation where unemployment exceeded 70 per cent, are setting up their own construction company.

In the past, most contracts for reservation projects had to be let to white contractors because of the lack of skilled Indian technicians. Today the bureau is developing Indian action teams to provide training on reservations in the technical skills needed to conduct, operate and manage their housing, roads and public works facilities.

A typical action team con-

sists of seven instructors: the team leader who teaches basic engineering, drafting, surveying and so forth, an equipment operator, a mechanic, a steel worker, a builder, a plumber and a electrician.

But the full implementation of the President's self-determination doctrine must await Congressional action on a number of proposals that were submitted by the White House 17 months ago.

Only a few of these bills have passed. Congress gave Blue Lake back to the Taos Pueblo. And the Senate finally voted in December to repeal the so-called "termination" policy which the President had called "morally and legally unacceptable." (Termination was designed to free Indians from Federal paternalism, but the policy brought extreme hardship to many Indian communities).

Congress went home for the holidays without voting on a bill to establish an Indian Trust Counsel Authority. This three-man directorate, to be appointed by the President, would provide independent legal representation for the Indians' land and water rights.

Also waiting action is a bill guaranteeing the right of Indians to contract for the control of services now operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs—an important measure, according to Mr. Nixon, because "it would directly channel more money in to Indian communities, since Indians themselves would be administering programs and drawing salaries which now often go to non-Indian administrators."