

149. Secretary of the Interior Seaton on Termination Policy

September 18, 1958

The first significant break in the termination policy of the federal government came in a radio speech made by Secretary of the Interior Fred A. Seaton in Flagstaff, Arizona, September 18, 1958. Seaton rejected termination without full consent of the Indians concerned.

... On August 1, 1953, House Concurrent Resolution No. 108 was adopted expressing the sense of the Congress of the United States to be that of ending the wardship status of Indian tribes as rapidly as possible. Certain additional provisions applied to Indian tribes located in the States of California, Florida, New York, and Texas, and to some other tribes in other States, with relation to the earliest possible elimination of Federal control over their persons and properties.

This stands as the most recent congressional declaration upon the subject.

Since that time—that is since 1953—the pros and cons of public opinion relative to congressional policy on Indian affairs have been given wide expression in the press and in other media throughout the country. Some people have interpreted these statements to mean that it is the intention of Congress and the Department of the Interior to abandon Indian groups regardless of their ability to fend for themselves.

In my opinion, the stated intentions of the Congress to free Indian tribes from Federal supervision, and to eliminate the need for the special services rendered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to Indian citizens, is more than adequately counterbalanced in the congressional resolution itself. I now refer you to such qualifying phrases as, and I quote, “at the earliest possible time,” and “at the earliest practicable date.” The intent is clear, I believe. What the Congress intended was to state an objective, not an immediate goal.

Just today I discussed that matter with Senator BARRY GOLDWATER, of Arizona, who tells me that his memory of the debate is very clear and that what I have said to you was, in his opinion, the intent of the Congress. If the resolution in any way lent itself to varied interpretation, and evidently it did in the minds of some people, the subsequently expressed policies of the Depart-

ment of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as well as the actions of Congress itself since 1953, should place the national policy statement on Indian affairs in a clear perspective.

To be specific, my own position is this: no Indian tribe or group should end its relationship with the Federal Government unless such tribe or group has clearly demonstrated—first, that it understands the plan under which such a program would go forward, and second, that the tribe or group affected concurs in and supports the plan proposed.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, it is absolutely unthinkable to me as your Secretary of the Interior that consideration would be given to forcing upon an Indian tribe a so-called termination plan which did not have the understanding and acceptance of a clear majority of the members affected. Those tribes which have thus far sought to end their Federal wardship status have, in each instance, demonstrated their acceptance of the plan prior to action by the Congress. I shall continue to insist this be the case and I hope and believe that Congress and its leaders will pursue the same course. To make my position perfectly clear, as long as I am Secretary of the Interior, I shall be dedicated to preserving the principle which I have just enunciated.

I further believe the Commissioner of Indian Affairs tried to make the position of the Congress and the Department of the Interior clear when in the fall of 1953, he stated, and I quote, “We want to give the Indians the same opportunities for advancement—the same freedom and responsibility for the management of their properties—as have other American citizens.” Then Mr. Emmons continued, “I know that there are some tribes which are ready and anxious to take over full responsibility for their own affairs at the earliest possible time, and that others will have to move along toward that

objective much more slowly and gradually.” He then added he recognized that in many areas there is a real need for a continuation of the trusteeship and will be for a span of years. And so it seems to me the intent has never been one of precipitating Indian groups into a position for which they were unprepared.

True enough, Indian groups can continue to exist as cultural islands in the midst of our national populations, isolated from the main group by language and custom, and living at standards far below those of the average American citizen. They can do this. In fact, many of them have done so for many years. But let me put this question to you: “Does the majority of the population of such tribes prefer to live in that manner, or does it do so because there seems to be no other choice? Or does it do so because there is no

general awareness of the alternatives?” I believe the majority of our Indian citizens are as desirous and capable of exercising all of the duties and responsibilities of citizenship as are the rest of us, provided they have equal opportunities with their fellow citizens. And having said that, I want to add this: under no circumstances could I bring myself to recommend the termination of the Federal relationship with any Indian tribe in this country until the members of that tribe have been given the opportunity of a sound and effective education. To me it would be incredible, even criminal, to send any Indian tribe out into the stream of American life until and unless the educational level of that tribe was one which was equal to the responsibilities which it was shouldering. . . .

[*Congressional Record*, 105:3105.]