

Editorial —

This week, the Tundra Times turns over its editorial space to Senator James Abourezk of South Dakota who remarks appeared in "The Destruction of American Indian Families" published by the Association on American Indian Affairs.

Many Americans and the Congress are becoming more aware of the difficulties Indian communities face in a broad range of areas, health, education, land and water rights, economic development, among others. But there are few who are knowledgeable about the difficulties American Indians face. A matter of vital concern to them: namely the welfare of their children and their families.

It appears that for decades Indian parents and their children have been at the mercy of arbitrary or abusive action of local, state, and federal and private agency officials. Unwarranted removal of children from their homes is common in Indian communities. Recent statistics show, for example, that minimum of 25 % of all Indian children are either in foster homes, adoptive homes, and/or boarding homes, against the best interest of families, tribes, and Indian communities. Whereas most non-Indian communities can expect to have children out of their natural homes in foster homes or adoptive homes at a rate of one per every 51 children, Indian communities know that their children will be removed at rates varying from five to 25 times higher than that.

Because of poverty and discrimination Indian families face many difficulties, but there is no reason or justification for believing that these problems make Indian parents unfit to raise their children; nor is there any reason to believe that the Indian community itself cannot, within its own confines deal with problems of child neglect that do arise. Up to now, however, public and private welfare agencies seem to have operated on the premise that most Indian children would be better off growing up non-Indian. The result of such policies has been unchecked, abusive child-removal practices; the lack of viable, practical rehabilitation and prevention programs for Indian families facing severe problems; and a practice of ignoring the all-important demands facing Indian tribes to have a say in how their children and families are dealt with. Officials would seemingly rather place Indian children in non-Indian settings where their Indian culture, their Indian traditions, and in general their entire Indian way of life is smothered. The federal government of its part has been conspicuous by its lack of action. It has chosen to allow these agencies to strike the heart of Indian communities by literally stealing Indian children, a course which can only weaken rather than strengthen the Indian child, family and the community. This, at a time when the federal government purports to be working to help strengthen Indian communities. It has been called cultural genocide.

A number of urgent questions need to be answered, among them what are the facts concerning child welfare practices by governmental and non-governmental agencies in Indian communities? What are Indian people seeking to do to change this situation? How can the Congress support this effort?

Underlying the answers to these questions are further questions about federal responsibility and past federal action in this regard. First, why has the federal government under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Department of Health Education and Welfare not been active or not been active enough in supporting and protecting Indian families? Why do state welfare departments which receive substantial amounts of federal monies for the welfare of Indian children continue to take actions which appear to be against the best interest of those children and families that the funds are intended to support? Why do Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Department of Health Education and Welfare have no adequate family rehabilitation and protective programs in Indian communities? Why is the BIA and HEW, by their silent complicity, continue to fund state welfare programs which act unlawfully toward Indian families and children?

We do not mean to suggest that Indian families and Indian communities like all communities throughout the country, are not going to continue to have problems. What we do want to suggest is that the pattern of discrimination against American Indians is evident in the area of child welfare, and that is the responsibility of the Congress to take whatever action is within its power to see to it that American Indian communities and their families are not destroyed; to see to it that Indian people receive equal justice and the support of the federal government. We are committed to a course in Indian child welfare which will eliminate present abuses and injustices and which will begin the long, overdue process of helping rather than handicapping Indian children and their families.