

Bennett In Rough Questioning By Bible, Jordan, Church, Others

WASHINGTON—Robert L. Bennett, who served for more than six years as area director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Alaska, was subjected to rough and searching questioning last week as the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs Committee considered his qualifications to serve as commissioner of Indian affairs, a position to which he has been nominated by President Johnson.

The nature of the interrogation of the first Indian nominated for commissioner this century was such that one of the participating senators summed it up by commenting "Now you know, Mr. Bennett, how Custer must have felt."

The commissioner-designate was questioned in turn by Senators Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.), chairman of the committee, Clinton P. Anderson (D-N. Mex.), Alan Bible (D-Nev.), Frank Church (D-Idaho), Ernest Gruening (D-Alaska), Len B. Jordan (R-Idaho), Milward L. Simpson (R-Wyo.) and Paul J. Fannin (R-Ariz.).

Other members of the committee present included Senators Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.), George McGovern (D-S. Dak.) and Lee Metcalf (D-Mont.). The appointment of the Indian commissioner is subject to Senate conformation.

The feeling expressed by all senators was that many improvements are necessary in the administration of specific programs of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Senator Gruening, pointing out that about one-fifth of all Alaska citizens are Natives, stressed the very serious needs of this group of people.

He described the problem of achieving economic prosperity for Native citizens as the most serious problem facing Alaska, and charged Bennett with the responsibility for developing programs that will increase the ability of Native citizens to achieve such prosperity.

Senator Gruening quoted a description of the status of the Native peoples in Alaska which appeared in the recent report of the President's Review Committee for Development Planning in Alaska, prepared under the direction of Joseph H. Fitzgerald, as follows:

"Westward Alaska, the land west of Anchorage and Fairbanks and north from Bristol Bay to the Arctic, is the home of the Aleuts, Eskimos and Indians. This is a land without a foothold in the 20th

century."

The nominee for commissioner stated the importance of enriched training programs for Native citizens to equip them for employment in positions that will advance their status.

He indicated such training programs should take place both at "outside" locations

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and by sending in sophisticated equipment to Alaska for training. He pointed out that, despite efforts at training, opportunities will continue to be limited to jobs available.

Bennett gave it as his view that the specific problem of economic deprivation of Native citizens will only be resolved by improvement in the economy of the state of Alaska as a whole.

Senator Gruening also raised with Mr. Bennett the question of a solution of the problems presented by Native claims for land made "in desperation" because no other avenue of assistance seemed to offer any help. Bennett's response to this was general and again related to the importance of improving economic opportunities for all the people of Alaska.

Senator Gruening also raised the question of segregation of Indian students in schools run exclusively for Natives by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and pointed out that dropout rates for Native citizens at Mt. Edgecumbe are entirely too high, being estimated at 50 per cent.

Bennett agreed that substantial improvements in educational programs are mandatory to improve this situation.

When the senator asked Bennett whether he thought reserving large tracts of land for each Native village was a solution, Bennett replied, "I don't think land in and of itself is a solution to the problems of the Native people. I so publicly stated at a meeting of the people about three or four years ago."

Senator Gruening urged that Native children in Alaska be given educational opportunities in desegregated schools.