

Confidence Shaken—

Interior, BIA Changes Blamed

By TOM RICHARDS JR. AND
RICHARD LA COURSE

WASHINGTON, D. C.—(AI-PA)—The possibility of a meeting between President Nixon and the nation's major Indian leaders was left open after private consultation between the National Congress of American Indians and a special White House assistant here September 2.

The private consultation, held at the request of White House

special assistant Bradley Patterson, was in response to a letter from NCAI and ten other principal Indian organizations across the country which stated that their confidence in the administration had been severely shaken by recent events within the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Joining NCAI in the written request were the National Tribal Chairmen's Association, the Affiliated Tribes of the Northwest,

(Continued on page 6)

Confidence Shaken . . .

(Continued from page 1)

Alaska Federation of Natives, All Indian Pueblo Council, Arizona Intertribal Council, Intertribal Council of California, Intertribal Council of Nevada, Minnesota Chippewa Tribes, Navajo Tribe, Small Tribes of Western Washington.

Observers here viewed extraordinarily rare alliance of national and regional Indian groups both as a gauge of the impact of recent Bureau personnel changes and policy changes concerning contracting and a sharp escalation in the combined power of tribal groups and organizations nationwide.

Meanwhile, other significant developments were occurring:

- Indian Commissioner Louis R. Bruce cut his vacation short to attend the meeting of the Tribal Chairmen's Association meeting in Window Rock, Ariz., Sept. 9-10.

- Water rights authority William H. Veeder refused his order to transfer to Phoenix, Ariz., August 30, and stated he would "not participate in the destruction of the Indian Tribes occupying those Reservations" which rely on Southwest waterways for their existence.

Deputy Commissioner John O. Crow replied to Veeder that he was "shocked at your distortion of the issues," and stated that he expected Veeder to be in Phoenix by Sept. 19;

- Two militant groups, the American Indian Movement and the National Indian Youth Council, joined in support of tribal concern over the recent BIA administrative and policy changes, and threatened demonstrations on Capitol Hill Sept. 20 and harassment of Interior and Bureau officials when they travelled around the country.

The multiple-signature letter to the President listed six events which had recently caused many Indian leaders to fear the administration was quietly backing away from its announced policy of self-determination and quietly tolerating back-stepping by Interior administrators on the President's Indian Doctrine of July 8, 1970.

The six events considered flashpoints in the letter were as follows:

- Appointment of an Interior Secretary (Rogers C.B. Morton who replaced the dismissed Walter Hickel) who disagrees with the President's announced Indian policy and who "practically dismissed it as political rhetoric";

- Tribal governments were notified they would no longer be regarded as the "sole qualified supplier" in contracting with the Bureau, and the re-letting of contracts competitively would take their place;

- Appointments of Miss Wilma Victor as special assistant to Morton and John O. Crow as BIA deputy commissioner without consulting tribes or organizations, regarded as "old-line and non-progressive bureaucrats" by the signatories.

- "Regression" of the BIA into "old patterns of paternalism and stagnation" by the replacement of Leon F. Cook in the econo-

mic development division, other personnel reshuffling, and "removal of certain important program areas from the control of the dynamic Indian leaders brought in by Commissioner Bruce";

- Contradiction between remarks by Harrison Loesch, assistant Interior secretary in the Bureau of Land Management, and presidential statements.

(Loesch in a letter to Sen. Eugene Burdick said, "Unfortunately, many tribal groups and Indian organizations have interpreted tribal involvement in the selection of Bureau personnel to mean that they have the authority to participate in management and organization decisions concerning establishment of positions and appointment thereto."

Nixon had stated, "It is essential that the Indian people continue to lead the way by participating in policy development to the greatest possible degree.")

- A "resignation ultimatum given to BIA water rights authority William Veeder, and lack of evidence to prove the administration's "sincerity" in protecting Indian water and land resources.

"We feel the seriousness of the above actions warrants your meeting with us to restore our confidence in this administration," the letter concluded.

Speculation mounted here, meanwhile, as Indian Commissioner Bruce cut short his vacation for the Window Rock conference with the tribal chairmen, who are, by their constitution, the direct voice into the Bureau from Indian country. Only last week, Navajo Chairmen Peter MacDonald said after a heated exchange with the White House:

"The time for letters and resolutions is over. What we as chairmen must do now is develop a war plan."