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Barney Old Coyote's remarks about educational opportunities and minorities

Barney Old Coyote

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TEXT OF REMARKS TO THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Saturday, February 5

Barney Old Coyote
Professor of American Indian Studies, MSU

Distinguished members of the Education Committee and the Constitutional Convention. It is at once a proud and humble privilege to share with you some thoughts about educational opportunities and some comment about minorities. It is an honor to share these few moments with you, recognizing the tremendous responsibility that has been placed upon you by the citizens of Montana. Mr. Chairman, with your permission I will read my prepared text, and when I complete this, I will be open for any questions or comments from your committee.

It is a humble experience for me, personally, to talk to you specifically about today's situations which could easily be projected for another 100 years or so. I say this because what you do with the Montana State Constitution and what you do with educational opportunities through this Constitution could well remain with the people of Montana for a long time to come.

My purpose here is to talk about educational opportunities, and I will emphasize opportunities for a particular minority of our state -- the Indians of Montana. I am mindful that you have heard several outstanding presentations in the past few days, and I also know that members of this distinguished body have a knowledge about Indian educational opportunities which exceed what I am able to offer. This makes me even more humble than if I were to appear before you on an issue that was being introduced to you for the first time.

I will not retrace or restate the history of education and equal opportunity in education, nor will I attempt to provide new insights into

and behind what has sometimes been called the "buckskin curtain", the American Indian situation. Rather, I will discuss with you two basic areas through which I believe the American Indian of Montana can identify new opportunities toward that particular time and day when the efforts of the American Indian of Montana and the rest of the state can mutually benefit both communities --- thence, all of us in Montana.

INDIAN EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY:

First, I would like to talk about Indian education. In this connection, I do not believe that equal educational opportunity as we have it today is enough. I believe that we have clearly demonstrated in this century that Indian people from the reservations and, even from off the reservations, are not equally benefiting from the "equal educational opportunities" that we now have in our educational systems. I would therefore recommend to you that there be a specific provision within the Constitution of this state which will authorize and provide extraordinary measures for American Indians wherever and whenever it is warranted.

I do not suggest to you any specific provision, nor any particular language to be included in the Constitution, but I would strongly urge that you include a provision that is at once responsive to the unique American Indian situation in Montana, but one which is still flexible in order that future similar circumstances may be accommodated. It would seem reasonable to expect that within the next century, and perhaps even earlier, that there would occur in Montana a situation that would be parallel and similar to what we find in the Indian communities today. It could be that we would have specific communities or segments of the population that would need an opportunity to catch up in the broad education community, just as we find the

Indian situation to be now. For example, we know now that equal opportunities in curriculum and counseling programs are not enough for Indian people. We find that the Indian community of Montana lags far behind the majority of Montana situations when it comes to education. We are finding that even special programs such as those that are provided by the U.S. Government do not reach this particular population in an effective fashion because, in spite of all the equal opportunity and sometimes even more that is being extended to the Indian community, the seven Montana Indian reservations remain isolated within the broad and general Montana situation.

In effect, these reservations are economic, social and political islands within the Montana situation, even though many of these communities have been in the backyard of Montana since statehood.

So it is what we should look now toward a Constitution that will permit the present and future governments of this state to become a necessary party in the solution of long standing problems of the American Indian. Education has become the key to success in this world. This is why I am specifically recommending to you that there be a specific provision in our Constitution that would allow the state to provide more than just an equal opportunity in education -- but to provide an opportunity to do even more in order that the Indian community does not continue to lag behind the rest of Montana.

This recommendation carries with it the idea that such a provision should be flexible enough to accomodate similar situations in the foreseeable and unforeseeable future of this state's population and government.

RECOMMENDATION FOR INDIAN DELEGATES TO LEGISLATURE:

Next, I would like to extend this idea into a broader and more general situation.... that of involving the Montana Indian community in those things that the rest of Montana will be doing today, and in the years to come.

Those of you that are familiar with Indian situations in this country will recall that any number of approaches, ideals, philosophies, and policies have been applied to Indian situations ever since special relationships with Indians began by establishing federally organized Indian reservations. The changing philosophy and policy towards the American Indian has sometimes been compared to a swinging pendulum reaching from one extreme to another from time to time and then repeating the process again and again. We have gone from complete jurisdiction over Indian situations (which has been equated with paternalism) to the other extreme of totally removing all special ties, restraints and conditions to "free the Indian". This is called termination. We also know today that none of these approaches has sufficiently succeeded and that we still have the islands within the prevailing system that I mentioned earlier.

Today there is a broad and general trend which President Nixon has called, "self determination of the American Indian without termination". There is a second point to this new philosophy, and it is called "consultation"..... consultation to gain from the Indian himself his own perception of his problems. This has been extended further to the idea that the Indian will now also be a party to establishing those prerequisites to solve his problems. But, there is a difference between this and the former policy which removed the special considerations and identification of the Indian community and which in effect set him free to do as he pleased. Because today we see that he will determine what his future will be without totally cutting him off from

the special relationship with the peoples of the U.S. (through the government) and without losing his traditional, cultural, and ethnic ties that he has lived with for many generations. This, in effect, suggests that the American Indian can now participate broadly within the American system without having to leave his ethnic and special situation as a federally recognized Indian community.

I believe it follows that the State of Montana should now provide these Indian people an opportunity to become a part of what Montana is doing and to insure this through extraordinary measures. This, then, becomes the second recommendation that I will extend to this distinguished body. I recommend that there be a provision and an accomodation to permit ^{each of} the seven Montana Indian reservations at least one representative in the State Legislature. This, in effect, suggests double representation from the legislative districts within the state where Indian reservations are included within those counties which have representatives in the State Legislature. I am suggesting that there be this additional Indian representative from each Montana reservation in addition to those representatives now in the legislature. This does not suggest that the Indian reservations are not now represented ably and equally with other communities, but suffice to say that Indians are not generally and equally involved in State programs, although they are equally affected.

By having a representative from the Indian community that was sent here by those residents of the Montana Indian reservations which remain the political, social and economic islands, we would then be able to involve Indian thinking and Indian participation at the very levels where it would be significant. I do not want to sound negative on any of this, but when we see

that these reservations are islands, we are suggesting that something more than "equal opportunity" has to be extended to these people if we are to see them as contributing citizens benefiting both themselves and the State of Montana. What I am suggesting here is that we address ourselves to the grassroots Indian situations of Montana toward special consideration and to begin through an accomodation in the new Constitution that you will draft for the future of Montana.

CONCLUSION:

I believe that the Indian people of Montana now desire to become more a part of the state and I believe that the rest of Montana desires to see the Indians begin to do more for themselves and the State of Montana.

I also believe that one community can help the other. This is why I suggest that we begin to involve the Indian people from the highest levels of Montana government through the local levels and to do this in a fashion that we extend a real opportunity to these Indian people to catch up with the rest of Montana; socially, economically, and politically. Once we accomodate Indian representation in the legislative process, we will do more toward a better educational opportunity for them and other minorities to come. This because we will have extended the practice of involving our minorities in the solution of their own unique problems and we will have gained the experience of truly extending every effort to provide true "equal opportunity".

It has been a signal honor for me to appear before you today and I want to thank you in behalf of MSU, for the Indians of Montana, and for myself, personally.