



5-11-1950

Letter from John Hart to Senator Langer Regarding a Speech Regarding the Rehabilitation of Indians, May 11, 1950

John B. Hart

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North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission

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John B. Hart, Executive Director
ROLLA, NORTH DAKOTA
May 11, 1950

Honorable William Langer
Senator from North Dakota
Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C.

Dear Senator:

For your information I am enclosing a mimeographed copy of certain remarks I made relative to rehabilitation of North Dakota Indians. If you find time to read the same I would appreciate your critical comments on the subject.

Sincerely,

John B. Hart

John B. Hart

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Remarks made by John B. Hart, Executive Director of North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission, at the Mountain States Regional Meeting May 5, 1950, at Rapid City, South Dakota.

Miss Gifford, Mr. Bennet, Ladies and Gentlemen: I have been asked to give a ten minute talk discussing how this relocation program may affect state and local levels of government.

As stated in the Hoover Commission Report, assimilation must be the dominant goal of public policy. On this point there can be no doubt. Indian people are almost unanimous in wanting to master and benefit from the culture of our times. They want to be able to live as reasonably prosperous non-Indians do. They do not want to be 19th century story-book Indians. They want their children to live as other people live.

The only question we have to answer is how can this public policy best be implemented. Most of us feel that relocation realistically administered with a thorough understanding of what causes local prejudices and an elimination of these causes will produce the tangible results we desire. If relocation fails, we are going to be just about forced to agree with those who claim the only solution is total elimination of the Indian Bureau.

Prejudice against the Indians actually exist. This is not a theory; it is a fact. To spend out time questioning whether or not there should be prejudice is like wasting time debating whether or not we should pay taxes.

Historically relief and hospitalization of the indigent has been the responsibility of the local real estate tax payers. These local tax payers had a large degree of control over expenditures and were able to see where their tax dollar went. Then, as today, every local administrator, as a political necessity, must exert every effort to prevent their taxpayers from being "stuck" with relief expenditures where the same can be done legally or otherwise. The fact that our

state courts have many times had to decide what political subdivision was to be "stuck" is in itself evidence of the feeling of the local people. Criminal statutes have been and probably will continue to be used for the protection of local taxpayers who are fearful of additional tax burdens.

The feeling that the Indians are the responsibility of the Indian Bureau is deeply engrained in the thinking of local administrators and especially local tax payers. They know that the allotment land owned by the Indians and Indian tribes is tax exempt. They know that the Indian on the reservation is entitled to hospitalization, relief and education at government expense. They have heard that in the State of Nebraska legal action was started a few years ago to force the local taxpayers to take care of the relief of off-reservation Indians. They know that the Bureau won by using legal action in the states of New Mexico and Arizona.

Yes, the local taxpayers view with alarm the relocation program that so far promises only social headaches and additional tax burdens. They are fearful that the local tax collector is going to reach into their billfold for the few remaining dollars they have been able to salvage for that rainy day.

The Indian is conscious of the fact that he is not welcomed by the taxpayers of the county. He and his friends have been told to go back to the reservation by the local welfare agencies. They know the answer will be the same in the future although Congress tells them they are citizens and the state law residential requirements have been met. They know they will find themselves in jail as vagrants if they do not return to the reservation. The local taxpayers will not be "stuck" if he can prevent it.

If we are to accomplish anything along the lines of relocation, we are going to have to let the question of right and wrong, theory,

idealism, equality, etc. set on the side line for the time being at least. We have a situation to deal with, not a theory or a question of constitutional law. We must accept as a major premise the fact that local administrators and taxpayers do not want additional relief burdens or the possibility of additional relief expenditures. The relocation program as now outlines presents this possibility.

We must accept as a fact and as a second major premise that in certain fields of employment other laborers do not like the idea of working with Indians. Within the last two weeks the employment representative of the largest mine in the state of South Dakota told me that many of the laborers resented going to the same showers with Indian or Mexican employees and that the only policy, in order to keep peace in the family, is to just not employ the Indians if there is any way of avoiding it.

The present relocation program appears to me to be like a weather vane--pointing in the right direction because of the pressure of the Hoover Report and the wind of popular demand, but it lacks the power of going forward and dealing with realities. Like so many programs for the Indians, it has no follow-up or follow-through. The Hoover Report suggests that the follow-up include assistance to the local governments so as to eliminate the resistance which is real and important to the Indian applying at the local welfare office. Why is it that the Indian Bureau budget estimate for 1951 in the state of North Dakota alone amounts to \$340,000 for welfare services for Indians on reservations, but not one dollar for the human being that does not happen to want to be a 19th century story-book Indian? Why is it that the 1951 estimates for North Dakota include \$423,779 for reservation hospitalization but not one dollar for the sick off-reservation Indian or his family who is attempting to be a self-supporting American? I presume that the answer is as usual that some local taxpayers will get "stuck" or the Indian and his family will somehow find their way back to the reser-

vation for that necessary care which they could have just as well received without such unnecessary expensive travel.

Without hesitation or mental reservation I will say that in my opinion the present relocation program is going to fail unless and until the Indian Bureau recognizes the realities of local resistance. Why is it that we cannot give the Indian off the reservation the same advantages he receives on the reservation? For the Indian who wants to leave the reservation, lets neutralize the pressure of local officials forcing him to return during periods of adversity. Lets take away the premium of returning to the blanket; but, if he does return to the blanket, lets at least be honest and direct our criticism toward the agency which continues to ignore these prejudices, and not at the individual person who happens to be the victim. Lets give him the same chance that we ourselves demand as a right.

Lets prove to the world that an American attempting to live off the reservation can and will secure as good housing as do the other citizens of this democracy. Lets eliminate our dump-ground shack towns and make the lives of these people at least American. In this city, Rapid City, within taxi distance of each of us, is disgraceful evidence of the shameful way true Americans are treated. True Americans who are attempting to do as we are doing--earning a living so that we can send our children to public schools. If you are truly interested in relocation and if you truly want to know the facts, visit the dump-grounds of your own home town, and there you will see the home of these Americans. Then you will see for yourself the homes of those who are trying to be full fledged Americans--not 19th century story-book Indians. Will your conscience permit you to tolerate the conditions under which these Americans exist? Thank you.