

## **THE STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP A TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE**

By  
Ila Lohnes, Chairwoman  
Devils Lake Sioux Tribe  
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### **SPECIAL ORDER OF BUSINESS**

REP. TOLLEFSON MOVED that a committee of two be appointed to escort Ila Lohnes, Tribal Chairwoman, Devils Lake Sioux Tribe, Fort Totten Reservation to the rostrum which motion prevailed.

SPEAKER R. ANDERSON APPOINTED Reps. Kunkel and G. Berg to such committee and Ms. Lohnes was escorted to the rostrum. Emanuel Cooley, Justin Elgo, Erich Walker, and Russell Gillette from United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck were also escorted to the rostrum and presented the Flag Song.

### **THE STATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP; A TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE**

**M**itakuyepi Cantema Waste Napeiyuzapi.

All my friends and relatives, with a good heart I greet you.

I am Ila Lohnes (Hintunkasan WastewIn) elected leader of the Devils Lake Sioux Tribe.

It is an honor and a privilege to represent the Indian people of the state of North Dakota.

It is, indeed, an honor to serve as spokeswoman for the tribal leaders of the state of North Dakota.

My fellow tribal leaders honor me by allowing my words to speak for them, for they have served longer than I.

Those tribal leaders include: Twila Martin-Kekahbah of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewas; Charlie Murphy of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe; Wilbur Wilkinson of the Fort Berthold Three Affiliated Tribes - Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara; and Russell Hawkins of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe.

We waited one hundred years for an apology for the massacre of men, women, and children at Wounded Knee.

Hearing none, we wiped away the tears in our own sacred way just ten days ago and set the spirits of our ancestors free so that we could rebuild the spirit of the Indian people.

Today we are here to speak about the state of the relationship between the tribes of North Dakota and the state of North Dakota.

When I think about the state of the relationship it's hard for me to address that issue when so much understanding needs to take place before one can begin.

Part of that understanding points to the fact that we were here in the yesterdays before your ancestors forced us onto reservations.

We are here today as survivors of a relationship fraught with broken promises, misguided policies, poverty, disease, assimilation, relocation, acculturation, and termination.

And we will be here for all the tomorrows that are yet to come, long after you, your children, and your children's children are drawn from this great state by the lure of a life not tied to the land.

We are tied to this land. We were always tied to this land. We always will be tied to this land. We are going nowhere. It is your people who are leaving.

So it is Imperative that any action by this legislative body speak to the needs of this state's indigenous population - the Indian people of North Dakota.

We are living in a time when the minorities of America, when combined, are the majority.

People of Color represent the future of America. And the Indian people represent the future of North Dakota.

While non-Indians are leaving this state for a future elsewhere, and while the immigrant population's birth rate declines, the Indian population is returning to the land and the Indian birth rate is rising.

Indeed, we are here to stay.

And we are here to grow.

We are here to rebuild.

And on December 29, 1990, in the terror of the same type of prairie blizzard that threatened Big Foot and his band before the revenge-seeking Seventh Cavalry murdered them, we wiped away the tears and honored the Indian people who will become a significant force in the rebuilding of our spirit.

And we will do it with or without your help. But we would welcome your hand in that rebuilding. That hand could represent the beginning of a relationship. But before we touch hands, we must begin to understand.

We must begin to understand the realities in which the Indian people of this state live. They remain harsh.

But increasingly you, your children, and your children's children also feel the harshness of alcoholism, drug dependency, poverty, inadequate health care, inadequate health insurance, the lack of affordable and adequate housing, the high cost of education, and government overregulation.

While the Indian people continue to seek the basics for survival, your people - with their once-comfortable lifestyles threatened by economic forces and the misguided policies of both federal and state governments - now also are faced with the struggle for the basics of survival.

We find ourselves - Indian and non-Indian - walking the same survival road.

We are at the same juncture, and it makes sense to begin a constructive relationship based on needs of human beings no matter what has brought us to this point.

I wish that one hundred years of understanding had brought us to this point, for then the state of the relationship would be good. Unfortunately for Indian and non-Indian alike, that has not been the case.

We now have the opportunity to write the history of the next one hundred years. We can write it hand in hand. Or we can continue to go our separate ways - the Indian people rebuilding on the land of North Dakota, the non-Indian people retreating from the land of North Dakota.

Often the best relationships are those formed during times of adversity. They are formed with understanding and equality.

These are times of adversity.

We need understanding and equality if we are to meet the relationship test - the test of doing things together constructively for North Dakotans - Indian and non-Indian North Dakotans.

If we come to understand each other, then we will have equal access to the resources of this state and come to view each other as equals - as human beings willing to work together to build a future for ourselves and our children - all of our children - all of our Indian children and all of our non-Indian children.

North Dakota is a sovereign state, as are the individual tribes I speak for today.

We need to do our business government-to-government with equal respect for one another.

That respect is tarnished when, as a sovereign, we embrace the responsibility for our governmental actions but are denied the authority to implement them without being subjected to state approval. The duality of that undermines the equality of any meaningful relationship.

On one hand we are responsible, sovereign government to sovereign government. And the next moment we are denied authority, in fact, subjugated – a colony of the state.

Furthermore, no matter what equality is intended in the relationship formed here today or in succeeding years, the history of North Dakota shows that it rarely translates into equality in the communities beyond these walls and halls.

In fact, historically, the translation has been continued racism - so much so, in fact, that racism is the state of the relationship. Understanding and equality, not legislation, eliminates racism.

So today, let us begin to understand.

Let us understand so that the children of the Seventh Generation – after the wiping of the tears at Wounded Knee last month – remember a one-hundred-year-old relationship that helped human beings, rather than a century where the Indian people cried over the loss of their grandfathers and grandmothers and for the future of their children.

We are beginning to find our way.

And you may be losing yours.

We could help each other. There is a way.

But there is no way to understanding because understanding is the way.

Let me share some things that may help us, Indian and non-Indian, understand each other.

First of all let us understand that alcoholism is not a disease that is prevalent only among Indians. It is a disease that is universal. However, treatment modalities cannot be universal.

Alcoholism is a disease of your culture and it is a disease of my culture, yet in North Dakota the treatment available is only of your culture.

Over the years tribal leaders have expressed the need for Indian people to work with Indian people in conquering this disease amongst our people.

Today, the Indian Health Service, which provides funding for alcohol and drug treatment, counseling, and education is mandating that those Indian people who currently staff the alcohol programs on reservations be certified counselors.

This is an initiative that tribes collectively have been pursuing.

The state of North Dakota has the most difficult curriculum for certification in the country. We have asked the state to recognize certification under the Northern Plains Indian Addiction Counseling Program. And the state has refused, despite the fact that neighboring states recognize that certification.

I have seen treatment and counseling programs in other states that are run by Indian people for Indian people. And those programs are successful. I would like to see the same for the Indian people of North Dakota.

Inhalant abuse is a problem both on and off the reservations throughout North Dakota. Our youths are destroying their minds every day. And yet in this state there are no treatment facilities to effectively handle inhalant abuse cases.

When we address alcoholism we also must address codependency. In a population where the alcoholism rate is over fifty percent, we know that the rate of codependency is double that. Codependency is a learned dysfunction that can be as incapacitating as chemical dependency itself.

I know that all the tribes I represent here today have a critical need for codependency counselors.

And I am certain the non-Indian community also needs an accelerated effort in this area. This Legislature has human services responsibility to address this issue as an integral part of drug and alcoholism prevention and treatment.

On a related matter, it is clear that the high rates of unemployment on reservations lead to the high rate of alcoholism/codependency.

People without jobs are people unable to provide for themselves and their families. People unable to provide for themselves and their families are people in despair.

Jobs represent hope and hope eliminates despair. With employment opportunities comes a sense of hope and the reality of self-sufficiency.

Yet, in this state Indian unemployment remains an invisible statistic to the non-Indian communities because Job Service North Dakota does not collect or record data on reservation employment or joblessness.

Indian people have a strong sense of pride and do not wish to depend upon government handouts for their sustenance.

In the days of old, Indian people provided for all of their own needs. When the buffalo economy was destroyed, Indian self-sufficiency was lost.

In rebuilding it is very important to rebuild individual as well as tribal self-sufficiency.

Economic development is the road to self-sufficiency for Indian and non-Indian alike. It is perhaps the most critical factor in self-sufficiency for the tribes of North Dakota.

And the successes are apparent. For instance, Sioux Manufacturing Corporation on my own reservation at Fort Totten remains the largest industrial employer in the state.

And the reservation dollar not only helps the Indian community, but also contributes significantly to the economic lifeblood of reservation border towns and the state of North Dakota.

Those dollars leave the reservation and build the coffers of local non-Indian border towns. We continually see border towns growing at the expense of our own economic development. We see the non-Indian border town benefiting from our dollar as well as the state of North Dakota.

However, when the Indian community needs a loan for more economic development, the non-Indian banking community denies the application.

This is happening at a time when there are fewer federal dollars available for economic development.

Governor George Sinner's plan to reorganize the North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission and to place a minority desk in a restructured department of economic development, as well as his proposal to reservations, is a step in the right direction.

In addition, gaming has become a force for economic self-sufficiency for the Indian communities.

It not only returns some of the dollars that leave North Dakota reservations, but also has been providing funds to support programs that would be lost as federal funding continues to decline.

On my own reservation, gaming funds are dedicated to assist programs for the elderly and the handicapped. Gaming proceeds support the St. Jude's Home for the Elderly at Fort Totten. We look forward to a continued understanding that gaming is vital to the reservation economy.

North Dakota's assistance in developing tribal motor vehicle licensing programs on the Turtle Mountain and Devils Lake Reservations also has provided needed funds and a sense of tribal identity. It is our hope that we can continue along this vein to develop tribal drivers' license programs.

However, the state Public Service Commission's continued insistence in supporting inequities in utility rates charged to reservation customers - both individual and business - undermines economic stability and growth on North Dakota's reservations.

The Legislature has a responsibility to consumers - Indian and non-Indian - to reexamine regulatory policy outlined in the state Constitution and Century Codes of North Dakota.

There is a serious question of constitutionality with regard to utility regulation in this state that's been ignored by this legislative body for decades. In fact, that the Public Service Commission responsibly oversees the regulation of utilities is little more than a myth in Indian Country.

As lawmakers, you also have a responsibility to examine some of the other myths that become obstacles to understanding reservation life.

For instance, two of those myths could be health care and criminal justice.

It should not be taken that the Indian Health Service is a provide-all for health care needs. The Indian Health Service is so fraught with regulation that it provides only health care to those individuals who qualify under what is termed "Category 1" - or life threatening health problems.

Take heart, though. That's one example of some progress made in the state of the relationship. We can now say: "The only good Indian is an ALMOST DEAD Indian."

Often Indian people are denied health care in North Dakota because they do not meet the red tape of regulation requirements.

Wisconsin has solved the problem by working with the Indian Health Service and the state's health care delivery system. The result is that Indian people are issued medical identification cards that give them access to any hospital within the state.

North Dakota's Indian people not only face denial of access to hospital facilities, but also are denied access to the criminal justice system.

Indian people accused of a crime almost never face a jury of their peers. In fact, they rarely see an Indian on a jury.

There is no justice in a system that allows a jury of non-Indians to determine the fate of an accused Indian, particularly when the members of that jury are selected from a dominant culture that refuses to understand who we are or how we must survive.

So, we come back to understanding. I have been forced to understand your culture in order to survive. You have been free to ignore mine.

There will be no relationship unless you take seriously the responsibility you have to understand all North Dakotans - non-Indian and Indian, alike.

Do you understand? (Wana gha pi?)

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