

INTER-AMERICAN INDIAN CONGRESS

Background and Overview

October 27, 1985

The Center for World Indigenous Studies acquired a 1975 study on the history of the Inter-American Indian Institute and its related agencies which was produced by the Joint U.S. Congressional Commission - the American Indian Policy Review Commission. This study combined with contemporary research is the basis for this paper.

1. ORIGINS OF THE INTER-AMERICAN INDIAN INSTITUTE - CONGRESS:

U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner John Collier and then President of Mexico Cardenas engaged in talks during the late 1930s about the need to improve the living conditions of Indian peoples "in the Americas" through cooperation between state governments. The emphasis of Collier's efforts was to promote "land-reform" in western hemispheric states so as to increase the economic viability of Indian tribes. Cardenas shared an intense interest in "Indian life" and the recovery of Indian peoples through land reform which had been the promise to Indians following the Mexican revolution.

As a result of these talks, steps were taken to formulate a treaty between states in the western hemisphere to establish a mechanism for "inter-state" cooperation on Indian cultural, economic and political concerns. These efforts led to the convening of the First Inter-American Conference on Indian Life, held early in 1940 at Patzcuaro, Mexico. From this conference seventeen states signed a treaty establishing the Inter-American Indian Institute, and quadrennial sessions of the Inter-American Indian Institute Congress (Treaty: November 29, 1940, 56 Stat. 1303, Treaty Series, 978).

2. FUNCTIONS OF THE INTER-AMERICAN INDIAN INSTITUTE:

The Treaty establishing the IAI defines its purpose in this way:

"The contracting Governments hereby agree to elucidate the problems affecting the Indian groups within their respective jurisdictions, and to cooperate with one another, on a basis of mutual respect for the inherent rights of each to exercise absolute liberty in solving the 'Indian Problem' in America, by means of periodical meetings, by means of an Inter-American Institute and of National Indian Institutes, whose organization and functioning shall be governed by this Convention in accordance with the following articles ..."

As a consequence of the IAI Treaty, virtually every signatory state established a National Indian Institute, and they jointly established the Inter-American Indian Institute to be initially based in Mexico City. Due to a reluctance among member-states to supply sizable funding contributions, the Inter-American Indian Institute operated at a very low level of priority in the concerns of state governments, though it did become a focal-point of interest and activity for anthropologists and other social scientists who regularly authored "papers" on ethnological concerns. Indeed, to the present day, the Inter-American Indian Institute serves as a kind of "museum of the mind" for social scientists studying "amerinds".

The Institute did assume quite different functions as far as the various governments themselves were concerned. Of all signatory states, only Mexico exhibited any real interest in the formal purpose of the Institute. States like the United States chose to "use" the mechanism of the Institute as a "conduit" through which U.S. government

interests could be advanced within Mexico, Central America, and South America. For example, during the late 1940s (near the end of World War Two) the U.S. government used the Institute to pass "anti-Nazi" propaganda into Indian communities, especially those Indians in South America involved in the production of rubber, quinine and other raw materials need in the war effort. The U.S. Congress was unwilling to fund the Institute through the Department of the Interior (several Congressmen had disputes with Collier in the earlier years), so the National Indian Institute was funded for several years through the State Department's Office of Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, headed by Nelson Rockefeller.

In the 1950s the Institute was used by the U.S. government as a companion agency with the United States Information Agency to distribute "anti-communist" propaganda to Indians throughout Mexico, Central America and South America. Other states "used" the Institute as a tool for the creation of "Indian Affairs Administrations" within their own governments (many of which became paramilitary government agencies), and they depended on the Institute for advice for the development of legislation and constitutional revisions.

The Inter-American Indian Institutes became an agency with consultative status within the structure of the Organization of American States.

3. IN RECENT YEARS...:

Over the last fifteen years, most states in the hemisphere have had little actual interest in the functionings of the Inter-American Indian Institute (except in the ways described above). And, the "periodic meetings" mandated by the Treaty were most often used "to display state successes among Indian leaders and successful measures instituted to integrate Indians into the 'national society'".

Despite the "positive displays" by state governments during the quadrennial Congresses tensions between Indian nations and state governments were on the rise in virtually every state. Indeed, political confrontations often became violent confrontations over questions of land rights, political rights, cultural rights and rights to natural resources. Violence in Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and occasional flare-ups in Mexico were never mentioned. And, with the rise of "international Indian organizations" (World Council of Indigenous Peoples, International Indian Treaty Council, Central American Regional Council, South American Regional Council) and the consequent increased activity and visibility of Indian Nations within international forums (particularly since 1975 in the UN Human Rights Commission, UN Non-Governmental Organization Conferences, UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, etc), state governments began to exhibit unease with the charges being lodged against them. The Institute assumed a new kind of importance for state governments: A device through which state governments could "share policies, practices and legislative concepts" for dealing with the "Indian Problem".

The United States government and its Indian legislative enactments soon became regarded by other state governments "as the most successful models for dealing with the Indian Problem" As a consequence, the Institute has been used to "transfer" successful U.S. Indian legislation like the Indian Removal Act of 1831, General Allotment Act of 1887, Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1974 to such countries as Brazil, Canada, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Chile and Argentina. These legislative enactments have turned up in Nicaragua in the form of the Declaration on the Re-Integration of the Atlantic Coast (1981), the Land Decree of 1979 in Chile which permitted the Chilean government to expropriate Mapuche lands for U.S. copper companies (resulting in the destruction of more than 200 Mapuche villages) and the "Indian Rights" legislation of Brazil which is portrayed as legislation designed to increase Indian equal rights, but in reality serves as the means by which Indian lands are expropriated and violent confrontations with Indian nations are justified.

4. FUTURE TRENDS:

With the Ninth Congress of the Inter-American Indian Congress convening in Santa Fe, New Mexico, signatory states will be joined by Canada as an observer (some speculate that Canada will seek to "join" during this session). Canada was not an original signator of the Treaty, and is not a formal member. This event will link all western hemispheric states for a more coordinated approach to dealing with the "Indian Problem". It will also connect a separate, but similar inter-state process, which began in 1980 involving the states of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. These countries began meeting (and have held three sessions) to deal with what they perceive to be "exaggerated claims and statements of native representatives within the United Nations and other International forums". The public and official reason for these meetings, which are called symposia, is "to review the policies, programs and administrative practices of each country; and the cultural, social and economic status of native peoples; and discussions of policies, initiatives, successes and failures; and exchange of collective experience and knowledge."

Through these "English-speaking" symposia and meetings involving Canada and the United States, these governments have begun to exhibit close cooperation in international meetings specifically concerned with indigenous peoples (i.e. the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations). Indeed, their cooperation is increasingly "coordinated" to maximize defense of state treatment of indigenous populations with the obvious intention of "out maneuvering" indigenous nation representatives in such forums.

Canada and the United States have cooperated extensively to "transfer" the U.S. enactments: Indian Reorganization Act (1934) and the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act (1974) to Canada in the form of the pending "Indian Government Act"; and to Australia in the form of the Aboriginal Development Commission. Both Australia and Canada continue to exhibit intense interest in the "success" of the Alaskan Native Claims Settlement Act.

The "Australia, Canada, New Zealand and United States Symposium on Native Peoples" appears to be dove-tailing with the Inter-American Indian Institute, thus connecting western hemispheric states with South Pacific Island States in a "BROTHERHOOD OF STATES" working to reduce the political and strategic effectiveness of Indigenous Nations in the international arena and within their own territories.

5. CONCLUSIONS:

The Inter-American Indian Institute is a "state owned and controlled mechanism which has an official purpose, but it is used instead as a conduit for "protecting and promoting state interests". It is not, nor has it really ever been, a mechanism to advance and promote the rights and interests of native peoples.

In many ways, because of the uses state governments have made of it, the Inter-American Indian Institute functions like the Summer Institute of Linguistics of the Wycliff Bible Institute - only on behalf of state governments. The results are the same: Interference in the internal affairs of indigenous nations and support of state governments to control and manipulate indigenous nations for state advantage.