

The highest-ranking Native American public official in the United States, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Kevin Gover, took a moment from his schedule to talk with *Smoke Signals* at this year's National Congress of American Indians Conference in St. Paul, Minnesota.

As he gets set to turn over his office to the new administration early next year, *Smoke Signals* asked Gover, a Pawnee from Oklahoma, about his future, the presidential election, regional issues and the future of Tribal gaming. Whether you agree or disagree with Gover and his views, it is hard not to respect his direct approach.

An Interview with Kevin Gover

By Brent Merrill

How are things going for you? I know you are winding things down.

Yes.

How have things been lately for you?

They have been good. I mean we have been getting a lot of things done. We had a good year in the congress — the congress still has some work to do, but we're pretty enthusiastic and confident about getting some good laws enacted. We got the Indian Land Consolidation Act amendments enacted and we had a good budget year so, I think we are finishing on a high note.

Obviously, right now the big thing that is on people's mind is the election and I know that without resolution it kind of has people in turmoil. What do you think about that right now and how does it affect Indian Country?

I don't know that it affects Indian Country any differently than it does every other American. I think we have to be patient and try to have some confidence in the process. I believe that a clear result will emerge soon. The good news — I saw a poll this morning saying regardless of who is declared the winner that the public is going to support them as a legitimate president. So it has been an interesting exercise. It obviously shows that people need to vote. And in Oregon and Washington and New Mexico — even in places like Iowa and Wisconsin — the Indian vote could have been the swing vote. If anybody doubts the impact that we (Natives) can have on elections, this election has proved it.

One of the things that I thought was really ironic was if I felt I had a choice I would have voted for the Nader/LaDuke ticket because we are so proud of Winona. It seems like many people felt that a vote for that party would take a vote away from Gore. What do you think about that?

As far as I'm concerned, a vote for the Green Party is a vote for Republicans. I respect the integrity of the Green Party, I respect their earnestness, but it is absolutely clear that when you vote Green you are basically voting for a Republican candidate. I frankly don't think a lot of people did that in Indian Country. I understand the appeal that Winona LaDuke has, but the reality was that she was never going to be vice president. I hope that doesn't prove to be the decisive factor. Because if it is, then the Greens are responsible for what happens for the next four years.

One of the things that concern me is that Bush has come out and said that he thinks Tribes ought to be governed by state and local governments. That really concerns us as a gaming Tribe. What do you think about that?

I think he said that back in April in New York. I don't think he knew just a heckuva lot about Indian law at that time. But, I do not assume at all that he will be hostile to the Tribes. I think he did a lot of learning on the campaign trail from people like Ben (Nighthorse) Campbell and Pete Dominici and I actually expect a Bush administration to be fairly pro-Indian. Not as much as a Gore administration, but I don't fear a Bush administration the way some people do.

So you don't think he will attack sovereignty?

I do not. I think that would be an enormous mistake and I think he'd lose.

So you think maybe this may have been a process of education for him.

Back in April he might have just uninformed, but now, you're thinking that during the last six months he has been learning?

I think that's right. I mean he was in New Mexico actively campaigning among Indian people and making commitments to them about education and about his respect for Tribal sovereignty so I think he came a long way in a few months. I think we should take a wait and see attitude and work to remind him and the people that work for him what Tribal sovereignty is. But, let's not assume that a President Bush would be hostile to us.

What do think are the most important issues on the West Coast and how can Tribes be a part of government maybe in a different way?

Well clearly the salmon issue is first and foremost. If it turns out that the work that the Tribes did in U.S. vs. Washington and U.S. vs. Oregon proved to be hollow victories because the resource has been destroyed that would be a sad comment on how the



Photo by Brent Merrill

United States stewards the resource. The Tribes have to continue to pound on the door. There are very powerful interests at work on this issue and the Tribes have not yet had their voice fully heard in my opinion. They just have to keep working at it.

What are some of those powerful interests that you allude to?

The timber companies, the power companies and even the agricultural interests in those states have had more influence to date on the resolution of the salmon issue than have the Tribes in my opinion. If we don't bring policy around to the Tribal perspective I believe the resource will be lost.

That would be a tragedy.

It would be a crime of historic proportions for those animals to become extinct.

What about gaming? Our Tribe became successful because we were able to get into gaming and there was a lot of controversy with our Elders to begin with. They weren't sure if they wanted to get into it. Now we have gaming and it turned things around for our Tribe — we have Elder housing now and we have the health clinic. Not only do we serve our own Tribal members, but we serve the community as well — we provide jobs. How do you feel about that and what is the future of gaming?

There is no question that gaming has been a net positive in virtually all of Indian Country. The real challenge for us now is going to be how do we define and how are we going to live with our prosperity. For so long we have been living in a survival mode. And, gaming really presents us with the opportunity to adopt a new way of life — a new attitude at least in some of these communities. To me the great philosophical question that this generation of leadership is going to begin to answer is 'can we handle prosperity? Are we going to continue to live in integrity with our values or is the money going to change the way we look at the world?' I certainly hope not, but I think it is a question that we need to start debating and have some earnest discussion of as soon as we can on a community-by-community basis. But all in all, I think Indian gaming is here to stay. Now, I think that there is always the threat that Indian gaming will be destroyed, not by prohibition, but instead by competition. And that off-reservation gaming will be authorized to an extent that we cannot compete with given our remote location. And that just counsels that we use this money wisely and that we put some of it around for a time when possibly gaming will not be the boon that it has been for the past few years.

What do you think about the explosion in California that is about to happen in gaming?

I think it is great. You know, California Tribes have suffered deeply for a long, long time. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has not met its responsibilities in California and the California Tribes have taken control of their own destinies and I think it is a fantastic renaissance for some people who had a very difficult time for a long time.

What does the future hold for you now?

I will be going back into practicing law.

Are you looking forward to it?

I am. I have had a wonderful experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I'm just very grateful about this opportunity. I will support the next assistant secretary regardless of who he or she is with great enthusiasm. I know the demands of the job and I hope that all of Indian Country will support the new leadership at the BIA.



Photo by Brent Merrill

Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt (left) and Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Kevin Gover addressed Tribal leaders at the 57th National Congress of American Indians in St. Paul, Minnesota. Both announced they would be leaving office in January when the new administration takes over. Gover said he will return to his law practice and Babbitt said he would not return to his roots as a lawyer.