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The Honorable Dave Anderson
Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Mr. Assistant Secretary:

As you know from our discussions, I feel it is extremely important that both the Secretary of the Interior and the Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs visit regularly with tribal leaders and individual reservation residents about local concerns and priorities, and I am delighted that you are not wasting any time in that effort. I appreciate that you have taken me up on my suggestion that South Dakota be one of the first places you visit as Assistant Secretary. Let me be the first to welcome you to our state.

I understand that on this trip you will be placing particular priority on the mission of BIA schools. In their conversations with me, Great Plains tribal leaders invariably place a high priority on developing what they call "the human potential infrastructure." Clearly, education is central to the realization of this potential.

On South Dakota's nine reservations, you will find that educators are accomplishing amazing things with insufficient resources. Imagine what they could achieve, and what heights their student could attain, if the federal government made a true commitment to working with tribal leaders to ensure that Indian students have access to the tools available to their counterparts in more affluent communities around the country.

Hopefully, your visit to South Dakota will give you a better sense of what is needed to strengthen the education of Native American children and adults nationwide. A good place to start would be to improve facilities, both classrooms and dorms, to eliminate the digital divide in rural America and on our reservations, and to respect cultural diversity, particularly preserving the culture and language of Indian people. We also need a commitment to ensuring that the Administration's signature education accomplishment, "No Child Left Behind," is more than an empty slogan on Indian reservations. I stand ready to work with you and South Dakota tribal leaders to meet these critical challenges and welcome your ideas as to the best way to move forward in these areas.

During your visit to South Dakota reservations, I hope you will make time to talk with community leaders not only about the status of BIA schools, but also about what they believe the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the White House and Congress should be doing to improve conditions in Indian Country generally. Your visit will undoubtedly further familiarize you with the myriad difficult issues that Indian leaders are dealing with every day, such as the lack of access to essential health care services, the shortage of adequate housing, the corrosive effect of substance abuse on the community ethic, the desperate need for economic development initiatives, inadequate law enforcement resources, and the deficiencies of Indian child welfare programs. I recognize that some of these issues may not fall within your direct jurisdiction as Assistant Secretary. But they certainly fall within your area of influence as the Administration's most visible official dealing with Indian policy.

In South Dakota, Native people have been hearing for years about the federal government's commitment to treaty rights, tribal sovereignty, and government-to-government communication. However, the federal government's actions often don't reflect these principles. Native Americans need a strong voice in the Administration to honor this relationship and fight for the funding and policy changes needed to honor our trust obligation, and our moral obligation, to improve the quality of life in Indian Country. I hope your experience in South Dakota will expand your appreciation of the serious challenges facing Indian tribes and people today and the deficiencies of government policy in helping community leaders and individual residents meet those challenges.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't encourage you to use your visit to South Dakota as an opportunity to talk with tribal leaders about Indian trust reform. I had the privilege of sitting on a panel with you and Ross Swimmer at the recent Senate Indian Affairs Committee hearing on this issue. At that hearing, Mr. Swimmer spoke forcefully about the Department's efforts to reorganize its bureaucracy to more effectively manage its trust responsibilities. My testimony focused on the importance of Congress getting more involved as an equal partner with tribal leaders and Interior Department officials to find a consensus, non-partisan solution to the longstanding trust management problem that has been mishandled by administrations of both political parties.

In a letter dated March 26, 2004, Secretary Norton invited me to meet with her and you to discuss what she considers a "tremendous gap between the information you are receiving with regard to the Department's actions on this [*Cobell*] case and trust reform generally and the actual facts." Trust reform is a serious matter affecting over 300,000 Native Americans on which the Department and I have serious differences of opinion. Therefore, I welcome that discussion with the Secretary and you. I hope that meeting will also provide you an opportunity to share with me your impressions of the challenges faced on South Dakota's reservations based on your visit to my state.

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely,

Tom Daschle
United States Senate

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