

April 2007 Column

In a special election on March 3, 77% of Cherokee voters agreed that the Cherokee Nation is an Indian nation united by our common bond of having at least one Indian ancestor listed on the base roll of our people. Following the special election, the national media got their facts wrong on many aspects of the election. I would like today to clarify some key points about the meaning and importance of this vote, and about the true nature of the Cherokee People.

An Inclusive People

The vote was designed to include as citizens those who share a blood tie to our Indian ancestors on the Final Roll of the Cherokee Nation, also called the base roll. The Cherokee Nation is well known to be among the most inclusive of Indian tribes. Here in northeastern Oklahoma, all we have to do is open our eyes and look around to see that Cherokees today are of all races, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, but we all have one thing in common – a heritage that includes an Indian ancestor on the base roll.

The Cherokee people are a warm and inclusive people. Just look at Sequoyah High School this last month. Six thousand Indians went to Oklahoma City to watch the girls' basketball team win a state championship and the boys' basketball team win second. On those teams you had players who looked Indian, white and black. But it didn't matter what their race or appearance was: every player was Indian. The fans adore everyone one of them and showed pride in being Indian. Our churches, our schools and our communities reflect that it does not matter what you look like. If you have one Indian ancestor on the base roll, you are a member of the Cherokee family.

Treaties and Citizenship

The Cherokee Nation has honored our treaties with the United States. Our 1975 Constitution enshrined the principle that Cherokee citizens needed to be able to show one Indian ancestor on the base roll – but our honoring of treaties has not been called into question by the United States.

But the more important point is that while treaties are agreements between governments, it is governments, through a vote of the people, which determine citizenship through a Constitution. With all due respect to those wishing to join the Cherokee Nation, citizenship in a sovereign nation is not decided by a treaty with another government. The Cherokee Nation re-asserted sovereignty and self-determination by adopting a new Constitution in 1975, and we have the constitutional freedom to determine for ourselves who is a Cherokee.

A Government that Works

The special election was called by a grass-roots movement of Cherokee citizens, showing that the Cherokee Nation is a functioning democracy. The people still have the power to

change their government by exercising their cherished democratic right to vote. It is also a basic, inherent right to determine our own identity. We paid very dearly for those rights. Like virtually every other tribe in the country, the Cherokee people took the position that you must be an Indian to be in an Indian tribe.

Remarkably several of our council members resisted allowing our people to vote on the issue, even to the extent of boycotting a council meeting at which the council affirmed election schedules. Joe Crittenden, David Thornton, Linda O’Leary, Bill John Baker, Phyllis Yargee and Taylor Keen voted no at every opportunity to set a special election on citizenship. In fact Taylor Keen told the national press that the election was “a sad chapter in Cherokee history.”

I disagree. Whether you agree with the outcome of the vote or not, a special election called for by a grass-roots movement of Cherokee citizens shows that the Cherokee Nation government functions on its most basic level: the people still have the power to change their government, even if some on the Council try to keep them from doing so.

It should be noted that descendants of the Freedmen and other non-Indians have been eligible for citizenship only since March of 2006, when the Cherokee Nation’s highest court reversed its previous ruling and allowed non-Indian citizenship in the Cherokee Nation. That decision, written by Justice Stacy Leeds, is the only reason the Cherokee people had to vote on this issue again.

Cherokee Family Values

It’s important to note in this discussion that the Cherokee Nation deplors racism in all its forms and we are deeply saddened by the misrepresentations we have seen of our policy and history. We ourselves have suffered bitterly from racism. Nearly one-fourth of our Nation died in the forced march west known as the Trail of Tears. Genocide against Indian tribes, like the enslavement of Africans, is a tragic chapter in America’s racial history. Today, Cherokees are focused on building a future that respects all people. We welcome every eligible Cherokee citizen regardless of his or her other racial heritage.

Our detractors on a national level try to convince the public that the Cherokee Nation has singled out Cherokees of African ancestry but, here in the Cherokee Nation, we know that’s not true. We know this vote was about whether all citizens also have to be Indian or if we will allow non-Indians to be citizens. It is overwhelmingly clear that having an Indian identity is what is important to Cherokees. Ultimately, the people voted their passionate belief that you need to be an Indian to join an Indian tribe – in our case, that means regardless of your other ancestry, you must have one ancestor on the base roll.

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