

The Oklahoman

Editorial

THE chief of the Cherokee Nation used part of his third inauguration speech to make a not-so-veiled reference to those who would involve themselves in the tribe's business regarding the makeup of its membership rolls. The message: Buzz off.

"By defending our constitution, we defend our government; we defend our people's rights and freedom," Principal Chief Chad Smith said. He added that defending the Cherokee constitution protects the tribe from threats posed by outsiders, such as "hostile members of Congress." Our guess is that Smith includes California Rep. Diane Watson in that group, and perhaps even Oklahoma Sen. Tom Coburn.

It was Watson, a Democrat, who suggested that federal money be withheld from the tribe unless descendants of freed Cherokee slaves, called freedmen, are returned to the tribal rolls. In March this year, the tribe's members voted by a wide margin to remove citizenship from the freedmen, who number about 2,800. The freedmen are black, as is Watson, which helps explain her interest. We doubt the Cherokees' election results would have caused her much heartburn had the issue involved a non-black segment of the tribe. Coburn is a conservative Republican from Muskogee, in the heart of the Cherokee Nation, and so his interest is more parochial. He too is suggesting that Congress become involved, to force the tribe to place the freedmen back on the rolls.

We prefer the approach of Democratic Rep. Dan Boren, who like Coburn is based out of Muskogee. Boren says Congress should keep its nose out of the freedmen controversy for the time being and let the legal challenge to the March election play itself out. To be sure, one would think Congress ought to be able to find plenty of other, more pressing issues than this to tackle.