HOPKINS ANSWERS SENATOR BERRY’S CHARGES IN LETTER TO SHEPHERD COMMITTEE

Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator, refuted every charge of illegal political activity by Tennessee WPA officials submitted by Senator George L. Berry of Tennessee. Administrator Hopkins placed his answer before the Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures in a letter to Senator Norris Sheppard, Chairman.

The text of Mr. Hopkins' letter follows:

August 27, 1938

The Honorable
Morris Sheppard, Chairman
Special Committee to Investigate
Campaign Expenditures
United States Senate
Washington, D. C.

My dear Senator Sheppard:

There have been addressed to the United States Senate Special Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, certain charges by Senator George L. Berry of Tennessee, alleging illegal political activity by officials of the Works Progress Administration of Tennessee in connection with the recent Democratic primaries conducted in that State.

I feel that it is proper that I place before your Committee pertinent information with reference to these charges. However, prior to the listing of these charges item by item, I wish to direct the attention of the Committee to the background of the charge which Senator Berry has seen fit to make. Senator Berry, immediately after his appointment to the United States Senate, took the position that those then in charge of WPA in Tennessee should be dismissed and others of his choosing placed in their positions. When we refused to do this, Senator Berry began his attack upon the WPA. As evidence of Senator Berry's demand that we turn over the Works Progress Administration in Tennessee bag and baggage to him, I wish to submit to the Committee a paragraph from a letter written by Senator Berry (a copy of which he submitted to this office) addressed to his colleague in the Senate, on June 17, 1937, shortly after his appointment to the Senate. Senator McKellar, naturally, did not agree to the proposal contained in this paragraph:
"In the matter of Federal appointments which are regarded as the State-at-large appointments embodying such positions as the Collector of Internal Revenue, State Manager WPA, State Manager PWA, State Manager RSC, State Manager RFC, and the Manager of the Government Soldiers' Home at Johnson City, you as the Senior Senator to select the first, I to select the second, you to have the third and so on, until all appointments are completed, and those who are associated with these posts to likewise come within the purview of this arrangement—I agree to support your nominees and you to support my nominees."

In furtherance of this, he later urged that he "should like to have Mr. George Dempster... appointed in Mr. Clift's place to be in charge of WPA personnel in Tennessee." Our files are full, covering the whole period during Senator Berry's term of office, of similar efforts on his part to get control of personnel of the Works Progress Administration in Tennessee. Along with this, Senator Berry has carried on a continuous attack upon the program and its operation, and the charges which he made in his correspondence to you are similar to those he has been making during the past year.

1. Senator Berry's first charge is to the effect that the Administrator of the WPA in Tennessee, Col. Harry S. Berry, and his assistant, Mr. Rhonon Clift, were the campaign directors of a coalition ticket which included his successful opponent for the Democratic Senatorial nomination; that this had been brought to the attention of the Washington office of the WPA, and that no remedial steps were taken.

It is no doubt true that Administrator Berry and Mr. Clift had their own preferences as to candidates in the Tennessee primary, this being their right as citizens of that state. There is no evidence that they did exert any influence on employees of the WPA. In fact, Administrator Berry prepared and caused to be posted throughout the state a notice to employees of the WPA advising them that "a person employed by the WPA, with a supervisory or administrative status, is privileged to vote as he sees fit, and is privileged to make a contribution or not to make a contribution to the campaign fund of any candidate, according to the dictates of his own judgment, free of coercion or intimidation." Administrator Berry has advised me that there is no evidence that any WPA official failed to observe this publicized notice. Administrator Berry has advised me further that Senator Berry's statement that the former had served as campaign manager for the Coalition Ticket in Tennessee "is a figment of his imagination and no facts to corroborate such a statement can be produced."

2. Senator Berry's second charge, according to the order listed in his letter to your committee, alleges that there had been raised from assessments and collections from the WPA personnel and relief workers a campaign fund of $125,000. He declares that this charge can be sustained by questioning Administrator Berry and others, under oath, as to the facts.

In reply to this allegation by Senator Berry, I again recite to the contrary the posting of the notice to the WPA workers in Tennessee that they were not and would not be required to contribute to any candidate's campaign expenses. I have received from Administrator Berry an unequivocal denial that a campaign levy was made upon the WPA employees. He also advises me that he will gladly testify to this fact under oath and before any tribunal.
3. The third item in Senator Berry's list of complaints questions the purpose behind increases in Tennessee's quota of WPA workers during the month of July 1938. He adds that he could have understood such action if it had been put in effect during the winter months.

The answer to Senator Berry's inferential insinuation of skulduggery is simple. It was widely known, in fact, generally publicized months ago, that the Works Progress Administration contemplated two things to relieve unprecedented conditions of economic distress in the southern states as soon as funds voted by the last session of Congress for emergency relief became available. One of these things was to adjust the WPA wage scale in the southern region to conform more nearly with subsistence incomes granted to relief workers in other areas. The other was the distribution of 200,000 additional WPA jobs in the southern states to give temporary work to seasonally unemployed agricultural workers. The fact that some of these jobs were available before the primary in Tennessee has as little political significance as the fact that Florida's additional quota became available only after the primary in that state had already been held. The WPA was confronted not with a political exigency but with the pressing problem of meeting the pressing need of jobless, hungry human beings.

Senator Berry can rest assured that quotas in the South would have been increased last winter (I recall he urged such increase for Tennessee in February of this year), if funds had been then available. But the Senator will recall that expenditures were limited by law and that Tennessee could not then be given an increase without penalizing other states.

4. The fourth charge advanced by Senator Berry recites that "the WPA in Tennessee solicited persons to accept positions with the WPA who were not subject to relief but who possessed certain political influences."

It will interest the committee to learn that in July 1938 the national percentage of non-relief personnel employed on WPA projects was 3.8. During July 1938 the percentage of non-relief personnel employed on WPA projects in Tennessee was 1.9. Comparison of these two averages reveals that the ratio of non-relief to relief personnel employed by the WPA in Tennessee was 41 percent below that for the nation.

5. The fifth charge advanced by Senator Berry states that during the month of July and immediately prior to the primary on August 4, 1938, WPA checks were sent to Tennessee and received by persons who had not contributed nor had been previously employed in WPA duties.

While the language used in the presentation of the foregoing charge is puzzlingly ambiguous, I presume that Senator Berry has reference to the employment of non-relief personnel for work on projects of the WPA in Tennessee. If my translation of his statement is correct the answer is the same as that which I have given to his fourth charge, namely that the ratio of non-relief personnel employed by the WPA in Tennessee during the period described by the Senator as "the extraordinary month of July" was 41 percent below that for the nation.

6. The sixth charge submitted by Senator Berry quotes press reports that during July 1938 the WPA Administrator for Tennessee announced an increase in the amount to be paid men upon relief. He states that it is "extraordinary" that this should have occurred when a Democratic primary campaign was in progress in that state.
It is a matter of long established record that states in the southern region have often protested the disparity in wages paid to the WPA workers in this region and the scale paid in other regions. With the increased distress in the South among the unemployed it became apparent that the wage scale should be increased. Limitations placed upon monthly expenditures by the WPA in the 1937 Appropriation Act however made it impossible to do this. As soon as the 1938 appropriation became available the WPA was able to make these long-deferred adjustments.

I have covered in the above in detail the various specific charges advanced by Senator Berry concerning the WPA. I have not undertaken to answer the other charges made in his letter to your committee since they do not refer to operations of the work relief program in Tennessee.

Very sincerely yours,

Harry L. Hopkins,
Administrator