

Presented by Mr. Larry Whitehead

Assembly of First Nations

**Restoring Our First Nation Languages to
First Languages Status**



*Presentation by the Chiefs Committee on Languages
(CCOL)*

*To the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Fourth
session,*

New York, 16-27 May 2005

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*(Introduction by Larry Whiteduck, Anishinabeg, Kitigan Zibi First Nation,
Quebec, Director of Languages & Cultures, Assembly of First Nations.)*

Who We Are

On behalf of the Chiefs Committee on Languages and the Assembly of First Nations, we are pleased to present to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Our Vision, as First Nations, for “Restoring our First Nation Languages to First Languages Status.”

We are here as representatives from the Chiefs Committee on Languages, a national committee mandated by the Assembly of First Nations to “protect First Nation language rights throughout Canada.”

The Chiefs Committee on Languages is comprised of 10 representatives from each of the Assembly of First Nations’ ten regional affiliates, which in turn represent 633 First Nation communities and over 50 First Nation languages across Canada.

Our Purpose

The following submission is based on two reports that were ratified by resolution of the Chiefs-in-Assembly at its Annual General Assembly, July 13, 2000.

These two reports are:

1. "National First Nation Languages Strategy: A Time to Listen and the Time to Act;" and,
2. "Draft - First Nation Languages and Foundation Act".

We are also tabling two resolutions:

1. Resolution No. 35/98, July 1998: "State of Emergency on First Nations Languages;" and,
2. Resolution No. 37/00, July 2000: "National First Nations Language Strategy."

And, finally, we are submitting the "Declaration of First Nations" adopted by the Chiefs -in-Assembly and the founding principles of the Assembly of First Nations Charter, 1982.

The Chiefs Committee on Languages is making its submission today to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in relation to Goal 2 of the Millennium Development Goals to "achieve universal primary education" under the thematic approaches of language, cultural perspectives and traditional knowledge.

(Introduction of Chiefs Committee on Languages Chairman, Chief Bill Cranmer, Kwakwakawakw, Namgis First Nation, British Columbia.)

(Traditional Greeting from Chief Bill Cranmer.)

Our Understanding

As a preface to this submission, we wish to clarify that when we refer to “Languages” in our literature and oral presentation, it is understood that Languages, Cultures and Traditional Knowledge are inclusive.

It is our understanding that language and culture are one and the same. Without First Nation languages, First Nation cultures cannot exist and First Nation languages can only be completely understood when learned in the context of First Nation cultures.

Further, that Traditional Knowledge (or Indigenous Knowledge) is the knowledge from our ancestors that has been handed down generation after generation and is expressed through our First Nation languages and cultures.

It is our understanding that First Nation Languages belong to the First Nations. We may choose to share some of our language, culture and traditional knowledge so that others may better understand who we are and our place in the world, but ultimately it is our decision, how much, when, where, and with whom, we will share this knowledge.

We view language as a birth right, granted to us by our Creator. It is our understanding that when a child is born the Creator bestows certain inalienable rights upon that child. One of these most basic rights is language.

Our Goal

When we speak of the Millennium Development Goal to “Achieve universal primary education” for the First Nations of Canada, it is essential that primary education be viewed from a First Nations’ cultural perspective that includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Education represents life long learning - from conception until birth, from childhood through adulthood and oldhood - until our journey on this earth is complete.
- Education encompasses all elements of human nature including the mental, emotional, spiritual as well as physical aspects of our being.
- Education represents the First Nation world view - our connection to one another, to family, nation, to our Creator, to the Earth - to all living things and the elements around us.
- Education honours the right of the child to learn in his or her First Nation language - not to simply learn about their Mother language, but to acquire the knowledge and skills to survive, in their Mother language.

The Millennium Development Goal to achieve universal primary education can only be realized by the First Nations of Canada, when the First Nations

have full control of First Nations education. That is the goal of the First Nations for the new millennium and for our future generations.

Barriers to Achieving this Goal

In Canada, control of First Nation education was taken away from the First Nations by non-First Nation governments and its authorities and through legislation imposed on the First Nations such as the Indian Act of Canada.

For over one hundred years in Canada, there was a systemic effort to denigrate First Nation languages, cultures and traditional knowledge. Residential School and later Indian Day School policies included abuse ranging from public ridicule and humiliation to various forms of corporal punishment and were inflicted upon children from as young as four years of age.

The long term effects of the violence experienced by First Nation children during their years in Residential School and Indian Day School are still being felt today. Many of our people must overcome years and, in some instances, generations of abuse and trauma for speaking their Mother Tongue.

In many of our First Nation homes, the intergenerational effects of Residential School and Indian Day School abuse, including the fear and shame of speaking a First Nation language, was handed down through the generations.

These policies that undermined First Nation control over First Nation education including languages and cultures are still in force today by the Government of Canada and its agencies such as Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Canada does not have an official policy on First Nation languages or Aboriginal languages that affords it due recognition and protection as the original or First Languages of Canada.

Reconciliation & Resolution

The Federal Government must recognize that it has a legal and moral obligation to protect First Nation language rights in Canada and ensure that the necessary resources are available to the First Nations to exercise their right.

Canada is a signatory to such International Covenants as the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirms the existence of First Nation language rights in Canada.

The Government of Canada must recognize that we, the First Nations, must create our own models for language revitalization and preservation, based on our concepts and our vision. Anything less will merely contribute to the further degradation of our languages. We cannot afford to make mistakes. Time is a commodity that we do not have in the fight to save our First Nation languages.

Throughout the past two decades, the Assembly of First Nations has put forward a strong vision for the revitalization, maintenance and preservation of First Nation languages. Despite the numerous reports and studies that demonstrate the overwhelming need for greater legislative protection however, these cries for “linguistic justice” have gone unheard.

In our vision, we are not strictly talking about creating an organization or institution, but engaging in a process to create legislation and policy that would enable First Nation control of First Nation languages revitalization, maintenance and preservation.

These priorities were set out by the Chiefs-in Assembly after consultations with First Nation Elders, language experts and leaders. This approach ensures that the control over First Nation languages is in the hands of the community that will ultimately be responsible and accountable for its revitalization, maintenance and preservation.

This process is a vital step as it is ultimately our First Nation citizens who will determine if our First Nation languages survive. They must be owners rather than subjects of this process.

These beautiful languages are the last vestige of our tribal cultures as our Elders, the ‘keepers of our languages’, pass away and our children and our youth become more absorbed into the modern popular cultures that dominate our media, our schools, our arts, and the world around us.

We are in a fight, not just to save our spoken languages, but that which is unspoken: How we view ourselves and our place in the world.

First Nation youth and children are the fastest growing segment of our population. As the guardians and trustees of their future it is up to us to ensure that their legacy, their First Nation languages, cultures, and traditional knowledge, have been retained for them and for our future generations.

Our children have a right to speak in the language of their ancestors.

This right was denied to many of their parents and grandparents. We cannot undo the past. But we can determine, today, the kind of future that our children and grandchildren need and deserve and that future includes First Nation languages.