

Resolution on
Languages

KEEPING OUR LANGUAGES ALIVE



***Presentation by the Chiefs Committee on Languages (CCOL)
To the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Fifth Session,
New York, May 15-26, 2006***

KEEPING OUR LANGUAGES ALIVE

-Presentation by the Chiefs Committee on Languages (CCOL)

To the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Fifth Session,

New York, May 2006

(Introduction by Larry Whiteduck, Anishinabeg, Kitigan Ziibii 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, fifth session. We extend our greetings to the representatives of the Permanent Forum and to our Indigenous brothers and sisters who have also traveled here.

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 Chiefs Committee on Languages had the opportunity to address the Permanent Forum, in its' fourth session and we are here again to report on our progress as First Nations in Canada and our continuing efforts in *Keeping our Languages Alive*.

We will also report to the forum on the dramatic loss of indigenous languages that continues in Canada today, despite our efforts, due to a lack of efficient and sustainable resourcing and the absence of any national policy or legislation to protect Indigenous language rights in Canada.

Once again, we are appealing to this forum to utilize its' mandate to convey a strong message to its' member states, and in particular to the Government of Canada, to uphold the linguistic rights of its' Indigenous peoples.

(Introduction of Chiefs Committee on Languages Co-Chair, Chief Mike Smith.)

Our Understanding

It is our belief that our language rights are protected by Treaty and Inherent rights under Section 35 of the Constitution Act of Canada, 1982, which states "the

existing rights of Aboriginal people⁴ in Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed”.

Our Indigenous languages, which are inextricably linked to our cultures, are who we are as Indigenous people⁴. The protection and intergenerational transmission of Traditional Knowledge continues to be a concern for Indigenous people throughout the world.

In 1998, it was reported by Statistics Canada that only three out of fifty-three Aboriginal languages in Canada were not threatened by extinction. Of those three languages, only one, Inuktitut, had increased the number of speakers while the number of speakers of other two, Cree and Ojibway, had declined.

Our Goal

In response to historical and current federal government policies and practices, First Nations have constantly battled to keep our own identities and languages in the face of strong assimilation forces. Our inalienable right to the preservation, revitalization, and maintenance of our own languages, which is essentially a right to be who we are, has never been relinquished.

We are looking for support, concrete support, from the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and its' member states, for our vision and aspirations. Support that says that we, the Indigenous people throughout the world, but specifically speaking to the Canadian situation, are capable of developing our own models and plans for reviving and maintaining our languages and that this must be resourced effectively and promptly by Canada in response to past wrongs. Since 1988, the Assembly of First Nations has been promoting legislation for First Nation Languages and still, to date, Canada has no national policy or legislation that recognizes the distinct status of First Nations languages as the original languages of Canada; legislation that would afford First Nation languages adequate protection and resourcing to safeguard them from extinction.

Our Initiatives

Despite woefully inadequate funding from Canada, the First Nation communities, regions and the AFN have undertaken a number of initiatives towards the goal of preserving, revitalizing and maintaining our languages.

The Symposium and Think Tank on Immersion Education, hosted by the Assembly of First Nations and St. Thomas University, was held in October of 2005 in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. The session brought together

practitioners of immersion education to share best practice models and collaboratively begin to address challenges. It was noted that there are over 450 First Nation Schools in Canada and only a maximum of 5% , or less than 20 schools, operate a First Nation language immersion or bilingual program.

The AFN also co-hosted the Hemispheric Indigenous Language Symposium, which was part of the Indigenous Peoples Summit of the Americas, in Buenos Aires, Argentina in October 2005. The result of this international gathering on Indigenous languages of the Americas was an agreement on, and presentation of, the *Declaration of the Protection of Indigenous Languages*.

Domestically, we have also spent a considerable amount of time and effort in ensuring that national discussions take place on our critically endangered languages. The Assembly of First Nations hosted a strategic planning session for regional languages experts in March of this year. The session was designed to look at programming issues and provided an opportunity to continue discussions on strategic planning for the future of our languages.

Last month, the AFN hosted a Critically Endangered Languages Symposium where we brought together local and regional language workers to discuss their needs

around research and baseline data, to network and share their experiences in language work and to discuss their vision for our languages now and far into the future.

Our Challenges

Currently in Canada, a recent change in government has led to a considerably more conservative regime. The new Harper Administration recently released their first budget. The AFN stated that “First Nations will remain in last place as a result of today’s so-called “Building a Better Canada” federal budget. This disappointing budget does not begin to address the gap in quality of life between First Nations and other Canadians and could increase the gap through inaction”. (AFN Press Release, May 2, 2006)

There is little understanding in the current federal administration, and in Canadian mainstream society as a whole, about the impact of First Nation languages and culture on the quality of life for First Nations in Canada. The primary challenge facing First Nations will continue to be a lack of financial resources to conduct local language initiatives including the development of our own immersion schools, funding for much needed research, and resources to pursue protective legislation.

As mentioned in the previous submission to this forum, Canada still does not have an official policy on First Nations languages or Aboriginal languages that afford it due recognition and protection as the original or First Languages of Canada.

Under the current federal government administration, it is unlikely that this will be accomplished.

The linguistic rights of the First Nations are not being adequately upheld by the Government of Canada as is evidenced by its' current funding levels. Presently, all Aboriginal groups in Canada including First Nations, Métis and Inuit, receive a total of \$5 million per year for community based language programming or approximately \$5 per Aboriginal person in Canada. These funding levels are unacceptable. In addition, the Chiefs Committee on Languages has continued to work in "good faith" with the Department of Canadian Heritage, the department within the Government of Canada that has been delegated the responsibility for Aboriginal Languages in Canada. The Chiefs Committee does not agree that its' First Nations languages, that are constitutionally protected Treaty and Inherent language rights, are adequately represented under the multicultural mandate of Canadian Heritage.

In 2002, the Government of Canada made a commitment of \$172.5M over 11 years towards the revitalization and preservation of Aboriginal languages and cultures. This commitment, while significant, is only a start to addressing the issue. In 2003, the Minister of Canadian Heritage mandated the “Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures” that delivered its’ final report and recommendations in July 2005. To date, these recommendations have not been adopted and funding levels have not increased. As a matter of fact, the Canadian government has made little attempt to honour the spirit and intent of their commitment and even the inadequate current level of national First Nations language funding is only in place until March 2007.

Our Conclusions/Recommendations

Our children and grandchildren have the right to speak their original languages and this is a right given to us by the Creator and one that we have never relinquished. Past and current government policies have and are having a detrimental effect on our abilities to pass on our languages, our culture and traditional knowledge to the next generation. We call on the Permanent Forum to strongly convey to member states and signatories of international conventions of the United Nations, such as the “United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” to uphold the linguistic rights of all it’s Indigenous Peoples. Specifically, the Chiefs

Committee on Languages, through this forum, call upon the Government of Canada:

To recognize that the loss of Aboriginal languages in Canada are directly attributed to its historical Residential School and Indian Day School policies and the multigenerational effect of these policies on our First Nations languages today;

To recognize that compensation for victims of residential school for loss of language and culture are a first step in the long struggle to revitalize, maintain and protect these languages; and,

To recognize the uncertainty around funding.

To call upon the Federal Government of Canada to proceed with language funding as per their commitment.

Further, to uphold the linguistic rights of the First Nations that are recognized and affirmed under Section 35 of its Constitution.

Thank you.