

***The Critical State of First Nations Languages
in Canada***



***Presentation by the Chiefs Committee on Languages (CCOL)
To the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Sixth Session,
New York, May 14-25, 2007***

Chief Bill Cranmer

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Introduction

On behalf of the Assembly of First Nations and the Chiefs Committee on Languages, we are honoured to be able to present at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Sixth Session. We extend our greetings to the representatives of the Permanent Forum and to our Indigenous brothers and sisters who have come to gather together here again this year.

We are here as representatives from the Chiefs Committee on Languages, a National Committee mandated by the Assembly of First Nations to “protect First Nations 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 Nations communities and over 53 First Nations language families across Canada.

Assembly of First Nations – International Work

AFN is continuing to work internationally to advance First Nations interests. First Nations were deeply disappointed about the Canada's decision last year to not support the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Despite the fact that Canada was an active participant in the Working Group, which drafted the Declaration, they were one of two countries that voted against bringing it to the UN General Assembly in June of 2006.

The AFN felt that the Declaration was of utmost importance and urgency to Indigenous peoples all over the world and its' provisions were explicitly guided by the core principles and values of Canadian and international human rights laws. Our National Chief, Phil Fontaine has stated that "this Declaration affirms diverse rights regarding lands, territories and resources that are essential to the cultural identities of Indigenous peoples and fulfillment of their basic human rights." National Chief Fontaine continues to call on the government of Canada to support this Declaration.

Canada continues to maintain that they are committed to improving the quality of life for Indigenous people. The federal minister responsible for Indian Affairs has stated that "Canada is a world leader in Indigenous rights, and the new government

has made it a priority to work towards improving the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples.” Yet the current Canadian government has not shown evidence of this, internationally or domestically.

Our Purpose

The Chiefs Committee on Languages had the opportunity to address the Permanent Forum, in its Fifth Session and we are here again to talk about the Critical State of First Nations Languages in Canada.

We will report to the forum on the dramatic loss of First Nations languages that continues in Canada today, despite our efforts, due to the lack of efficient and sustainable resources and the absence of any National policy or legislation to protect First Nations 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 Indigenous peoples.

Our Understanding – First Nations Languages

First Nations have declared that:

- Our languages embody our relationship with the Creator and express our fundamental beliefs and values. Our languages form the cornerstone of who we are as First Nations;
- First Nations contend that their language rights are recognized and affirmed under Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982;
- The Government of Canada has a fiduciary obligation to provide the necessary resources to the First Nations in order to protect their languages;
- That our language rights extend to every First Nations child, to learn, and be taught in his or her First Nations language; and
- That First Nations must control all aspects of First Nations language revitalization, maintenance and protection including the design and delivery of First Nations language programming.

First Nations expect these principles to form the framework and approach that the Government of Canada must employ, together with First Nations governments, to make advancements in this area.

The Current Situation

In 1998, the Assembly of First Nations declared a state of emergency on First Nations languages. It is recognized that many First Nations languages in Canada face near extinction. Statistics show that 50 out of 53 First Nations languages were declining, endangered or facing extinction. In terms of the three First Nations languages that are not facing extinction (Cree, Ojibway and Inuktitut), the number of Cree and Ojibway speakers are declining.

The reason for the desperate state of First Nations languages is due to the genocidal actions of the Canadian government. Canada used the residential school system in their attempt to assimilate First Nations children. First Nations children were systematically removed from their homes and sent great distances to reside in residential schools. In these schools, First Nations children were physically abused for speaking their traditional languages. As these children became parents, they refused to teach their children their languages in order to save them from the abuses that they had to endure.

The AFN continues to state that our languages, therefore our cultures, are in imminent danger of being lost forever and the Canadian government continues to place the lowest priority on the issue.

In November 2006, to the dismay of all First Nations, Minister of Canadian Heritage, Beverly Oda announced that \$160 million, which had been originally intended for First Nations languages, had been removed from the fiscal framework by the federal government. This funding cutback was part of the \$172.5 million announced in 2002 for the revitalization and preservation of First Nations languages.

The Canadian government has demonstrated very little understanding of the impact of the loss of First Nations languages. It would be devastating not only to First Nations in Canada, but it would be a serious loss to traditional knowledge and to our culture(s).

While the AFN is hoping to undertake more up to date research on the state of First Nations Languages in Canada, we fear the alarmingly trend towards the complete elimination of all First Nations languages will be proven with new data.

From 1996-2001, the Aboriginal Peoples Survey showed that the total number of Aboriginal people who identified by Mother Tongue declined from 23 % to 9% in spite of the fact that the total Aboriginal population surveyed increased by 18%.

AFN conducted its own survey between 1990 and 1993 and found that almost 70% of First Nations communities' languages are in decline, endangered or critically endangered.

Canada continues to ignore the issue even though our Elders, our only fluent speakers in some cases, are dying every day. The loss of government funding to support the revitalization and maintenance of our languages has dashed any hopes or plans that we had to begin to address this situation in our own way.

Our Plan

In 2000, the Chiefs Committee on Languages developed a National Languages Strategy called "*A Time to Listen and The Time to Act: National First Nations Languages Strategy*." The strategy contained 14 recommendations based on a body of research conducted by the AFN over the past 30 years, including vital direction provided by Elders at a national language conference held in 1993. The strategy was adopted by resolution of the Chiefs-in-Assembly in July 2000.

Now, First Nations must re-confirm and focus the National Strategy and deliver clear messages to Canada that it must properly resource First Nations in order to

protect their languages. First Nations seek support from Canadians and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to ensure that this happens.

With the new National Strategy, our goal is to achieve recognition, protection and sustainable investment to ensure the survival, promotion and growth of First Nations languages throughout Canada. The favourite word of the current government is "targets" and it is incredibly hard to access funding with concrete numbers. While the need for target and goals is obvious, it should be noted that the impact of increasing the use of First Nations languages in the communities went far beyond the number of individuals using their original language, but it also spoke to the reclaiming of First Nations identity as a whole. It should also be noted that targets cannot be established without a clear view of the current situation and this cannot be identified without research and research cannot be undertaken without funding. This is the cycle that we are in.

What are our next steps?

We will continue our work despite fighting our own government at every turn. We are working to finalize our new National First Nations Language Strategy and continue to lobby Canada to uphold their fiduciary obligations towards First Nations. This will take many forms including the possibility of court cases to

assert our jurisdiction over our languages according to the Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act, 1982. We will take an active role to protect our languages.

We call on the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to support First Nations, support our linguistic rights, and support our right to exist as distinct and unique peoples.

We call on you the Member States to hold Canada accountable for the wrongs suffered by First Nations in Canada not only in the distant past, but their continued reluctance to honour First Nations jurisdiction over languages based on our sacred Aboriginal and Treaty rights. We must remind the Member States that it was Canada's intentional policies of assimilation, which have lead to the fact that First Nations languages are on the brink of extinction and the Canadian Government must address this.

From Canada, we demand proper resources for the protection of First Nations languages. The Chiefs Committee on Languages has already indicated to the Minister of Canadian Heritage that we will be seeking proper resources for the protection of First Nations languages. There is a good possibility that First Nations

will require additional resources over and above the \$160 million that was cut from the fiscal framework. It is an essential requirement and outstanding commitment of the Government of Canada and refers back to RCAP recommendations and acknowledgement by Canada of the critical state of First Nations languages.

We also demand from Canada a commitment to the highest human ideals of equality, morality, and recognition of the rights of all people, including Indigenous people, on the international stage by ending their political stand against the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Finally, from the Member States, we humbly asked for your support in our efforts to save our languages and cultures and ask that you call on Canada to live up to their commitments and obligations.

Thank you.