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The Honourable Larry Bagnell

Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.)): Good morning. Welcome to the 99th meeting of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, as we pursue our study on the use of indigenous languages in proceedings in the House of Commons.

We are pleased to be joined by Dr. Arok Wolvengrey, Professor in Algonquian Languages and Linguistics, Department of Indigenous Languages, Arts, and Cultures at the First Nations University of Canada. Dr. Wolvengrey is appearing by video conference from Regina.

We're on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquins.

The opening statement will be in Cree. People might want to put on the earpieces to hear the translation.

Dr. Wolvengrey, thank you very much for joining us. This will be very helpful and we'll let you do some opening comments.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey (Professor, Algonquian Languages and Linguistics, Department of Indigenous Languages, Arts and Cultures, First Nations University of Canada): [*Witness spoke in Cree, interpreted as follows*:]

Hello. I greet all of you here today.

Arok Wolvengrey is my name. I'm also called White Eagle in Cree.

I am grateful that I've been invited here to speak about indigenous languages.

I am happy to be allowed to speak Cree on this day.

I thank you that you are starting to hear these language.

As well, I am also happy that you started listening to these languages here in the Government of Canada.

Thank you.

[*English*]

It's my understanding that Minister Saganash has already spoken to this committee about the inherent right to function in one's mother tongue, as ensured in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and he's added his belief that this is also entrenched within various sections of the Canadian Charter of Rights and the Constitution.

Honourable Senator Serge Joyal and MP Ouellette emphasized the aboriginal right to languages entrenched in section 35 of the Constitution Act. I can certainly not speak with any more authority or eloquence than MPs Saganash and Ouellette and Senator Joyal in such matters.

If it is wished, I can speak to the importance of language to the identity of both an individual and a people. I can also place this in a national context of reconciliation with the indigenous nations within this land, now known as Canada.

[*Witness speaks in Cree*]

However, I expect that I've been asked to speak here today about the languages themselves and the logistics of providing simultaneous interpretation or translation of indigenous languages spoken here in Canada and thus potentially in the House of Commons.

I will do my best to answer your questions.

[*Witness speaks in Cree*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Graham for some questions.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham (Laurentides—Labelle, Lib.): Thank you for being here and for your brief opening remarks.

Thank you for your offer to speak to the importance of language, especially in the context of reconciliation, and I invite you to do that.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I've been asked this a number of times. I was asked it on CBC television a few weeks ago, and I tend to stumble through the usual platitudes about the fact that everything we do is within language. We organize our thoughts that way. We communicate our culture generation to generation that way. We are essentially shaped by the way we think about things, and the way we think about things is within our own first language. Some of us who are lucky and skilled enough to have more than one language—and I do not count myself fully in that group—are able to do that functionally in two or more languages, and that is a gift.

One of the things I thought, the last time I answered this question was to ask if you could rephrase the question without using language. Clearly, you couldn't. The fact that we need language to communicate is self-evident, and also the fact that, when we grow up learning a language to a level of fluency, that allows us to be eloquent in our language. There are gifted individuals who reach that level in more than one language, but it's not necessarily that usual. I expect the vast majority of us, whether we're bilingual or trilingual, still feel most comfortable in our first language, the one in which we communicate with our family and with our community.

Again, we could continue on and just talk about the knowledge that is inherent within each language, and how things do not necessarily translate, and that there's so much we don't know because we don't speak to the people who do know it in their language.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I think the other half of what we're talking about is reconciliation. We talked about the knowledge needed. Do you have any more comments on that?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Absolutely. Obviously, there are a number of different recommendations of the TRC on reconciliation that are specific to language. There certainly has been a history of not allowing the languages, actively discouraging them, which is counter to the rights that we talked about in UNDRIP and through the Constitution. As to reconciliation, when I speak to colleagues about it, when I speak to communities about it, when I see their reactions to various things happening in society, language is one of the greatest foci of those discussions, of course. I think a number of things have occurred, with apologies and the TRC itself, that are moving in a good direction. What we are talking about today is part of that.

However, there are still a lot of things, and there's a lot of mistrust out there as to how much reconciliation is really going to achieve, and that's unfortunate. I find comments like that disheartening at times. A lot of it centres on the fact that so many people don't have their languages and they want them back very desperately.

● (1110)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I appreciate your point.

I think most of us, if not all of us, are on the same page as to the importance of figuring out how to make this work here in Parliament. Our job also involves practical considerations.

In terms of figuring out how we go about it, can you give us your thoughts on what languages and how and what processes are fair and what would be completely unacceptable in your view? For example, I mean making sure people can be understood in their languages and deciding what languages should be understood if they're not spoken by any MP but are spoken in the wider public.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I followed some of the earlier testimony from this committee on this issue. I'm fully cognizant of the fact that suddenly trying to provide simultaneous translation for 60 languages across the country is essentially undoable. However, I think a number of things have been brought up that do make a lot of sense as a starting point, which is that the members within Parliament right now, within the House of Commons, who speak an indigenous language can certainly be represented. There are not, I think, a lot of languages right now that are represented, whether that is Cree, and we can talk about the different dialects, Inuktitut, with potentially different dialects there as well, Anishinaabemowin or Ojibwa. Dene, of course, we had Ms. Jolibois speak.

We can certainly look at the languages that are currently represented as a starting point. From the other point of view, I mentioned interpretation and translation, and I make the division there between oral interpretation versus written translation. That's another logistical issue. I think, to start, interpretation is the essential thing. We would always start with the oral way. Translation and the proper representation of the languages, the orthography, if there is a standard orthography, is another issue and a next step as well, but I would think oral interpretation would be the primary starting point.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I appreciate that.

This is a very practical question, but I think it's an important one. What's your sense of the availability of interpreters and translators, and how would this help expand that?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I think it will not be difficult for the languages we just mentioned to find competent individuals who can fully interpret between the two languages, whether it be English and Cree, French and Cree, or English and French and Inuktituk. For Dene, I'm not certain about the possibility of French and Dene translation, but I assume that there may be individuals. As you get further west, for sure, and especially in very small speech communities, finding simultaneous translation between, say, some of the west coast languages and French may start to become fairly difficult, but simultaneous translation with English, I think, should not be a problem.

I know the issue was raised about relay translation, which would certainly be an issue for some languages and French.

● (1115)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you very much for that.

I think I have run well over my time.

The Chair: Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Banff—Airdrie, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here, virtually, with us today.

I have some questions that are probably similar to those of my colleague.

You teach Cree. I assume that there are a lot of different dialects. How many are there, as far as you're aware?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: In the broadest sense, when we talk about the Cree dialects, there's a division between western and eastern Cree dialects, which run more or less along the Ontario-Quebec border, although Atikamekw in Quebec is usually considered one of the western dialects because of a particular sound change.

Broadly speaking, we talk about five dialects in the west: Plains, Woods, and Swampy, which can be subdivided, with Moose Cree along the southern coast of James Bay, Moose Factory, and so on, and Atikamekw in Quebec. There are the eastern Cree dialects, Innu, which has subdialects as well, Naskapi, and East Cree, with northern and southern East Cree.

Those are the main dialects.

Mr. Blake Richards: Would the dialects be mutually intelligible or would it just be that the western ones would be and the eastern ones would be?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: That's a very good question. The practical aspect is that there is no absolute dividing line between them. It's a language or dialect continuum, so community to community, people can readily understand one another, but as you get to the extreme ends of that, mutual intelligibility starts to break down. Some very gifted individuals with some experience of them can adapt better than others, but for many younger speakers, if they're confronted with a dialect, say Plains Cree to Moose Cree, or especially to East Cree and into Quebec, it becomes very difficult to understand one another.

Mr. Blake Richards: Would there potentially be a requirement for interpretation between the different dialects in some cases?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I would say yes. I have the experience of working with a number of individuals across the country. We had a meeting at Carleton University where we had speakers of Plains Cree and Innu, and we didn't have a common language because the Inuit speakers were bilingual with French, and the Plains Cree speakers were bilingual with English. They could understand a little bit between Plains Cree and Innu, but not sufficient.

Mr. Blake Richards: In terms of interpretation, I think in response to my colleague's question, you indicated that you felt there was probably enough interpreters who would be available for the English translation, but for French, it might be a bit more challenging. That was in a nutshell, I think, what you'd said.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Especially for some languages, yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: I assume you're probably pretty familiar with the translation bureau's standards and qualifications for interpreters and translators.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Somewhat so, yes. I have some experience with ATIS here in Saskatchewan as well.

Mr. Blake Richards: Would you say that the interpreters you'd be aware of in those instances would meet those standards and qualifications presently, or would there be some training or upgrades required in order for them to meet those?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I think it depends on the individuals themselves. I think there are individuals who could meet those standards, and if there were the tests available to show that, I think you would find that.

One issue we have with ATIS is that their test was purely written, so it's very difficult to find people who are fully literate in their language, you could say. I think for the oral interpretation, we could definitely find people who do meet those standards. The other side of it, though, is that there aren't a lot of training programs—hardly any—that would help others reach that level at this time.

Mr. Blake Richards: That leads me into what I wanted to ask you about next, which is a bit about your teaching. I wonder if you could tell me a bit about your faculty. How many students do you have enrolled in the languages programs at your university?

● (1120)

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: At this particular time our faculty is somewhat reduced from what it once was. When I first joined here 24 years ago, we had nine individuals in our faculty. We had three full-time Cree instructors, three full-time Saulteaux instructors. We had three full-time linguists, myself included. We employed sessionals for other languages that we taught in Nakota and Dakota, and occasional Dene classes in the north.

We have a number of programs in Cree and Saulteaux. Particularly we have full-degree programs and we created classes, and we still have literacy-based classes. For our oracy-based classes, there was not a huge amount of demand because essentially either we'd get fluent speakers or we'd get non-fluent speakers, and the non-fluent ones seemed to gravitate towards the literacy first. Even though they might want to improve their speaking skills, fluent speakers didn't partake of the oracy classes, and it became a logistical problem to offer them with small numbers.

We have minor programs in the other languages spoken here in Saskatchewan. We're attempting to broaden that, but at the moment, we are down to four in our faculty: two linguists, one Cree instructor, one Saulteaux instructor, and then various sessionals for the other languages.

The enrolment numbers are not large, and again, a lot of that has to do with whether there's a demand out there for the particular skill set that we try to impart with our program.

Mr. Blake Richards: You said you have minors. Obviously, you would have people who would have majors in these languages as well.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: I know the numbers aren't large, but how many students would we be talking about? How many students per year would come out with a degree?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Out of the program, it's minimal. We have one or two per year actually coming through the program, and that's for the Cree program, and occasionally the Saulteaux program is a full-degree program. Essentially the demand has not necessarily been there. They will take the class as a minor more likely. We have education programs where teachers are allowed to concentrate on language, so we produce some language teachers as well through that program. We have a pre-degree certificate program that allows people just to get the expertise to teach the language without approaching a full education degree. We have a number of different things like that. But again, in recent years our particular programs and our university has suffered some retraction in our capacity to deliver programs like this.

I'll leave it at that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Chair: *Meegwetch.*

Mr. Saganash.

[*Translation*]

M. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NPD): *Meegwetch*, Mr. Chair.

[*Member speaks in Cree.*]

[*English*]

First of all, Arok, I want to thank you for calling me Minister Saganash. Although I'm not a minister, I find it has a nice ring to it.

Thank you for being with us. I listened carefully to your presentation, and there are a couple of things I would like to ask you.

You talked about the fact that indigenous language rights are already entrenched in the Canadian Constitution. Could you elaborate on how, according to you, section 35 is related to section 25 of the Constitution, and to other sections, sections 23 and 22, in particular?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I certainly will not claim to be an expert on the constitutional legality of the standpoint that has been argued. I mentioned that you had brought these things forward in your testimony, and in briefly going through those articles, I can see that the argument there is valid. It's been used in a number of court cases to talk about indigenous language rights and indigenous rights in general, and certainly I think it also relates to treaty rights. There was nothing in treaty that said that we're going to cease to use our languages. In the absence of such a thing, I think our ability to communicate in our own language is just one of our inherent rights. There's nothing in any of the articles that abrogates that. In fact, a number of the articles speak to the fact that there's nothing in particular articles that abrogates our basic rights.

● (1125)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: In your work as a linguist, have you come across any new words in different Algonquin languages?

I gave the example to this committee of the eastern Cree. I'm from James Bay on the Quebec side. I'm the first Cree from northern Quebec to have been elected to Parliament, back in 2011. It's understandable, then, that there was no word for "member of Parliament" in our language. We literally had to work with elders to determine the best word we could use to define what a member of Parliament does, and that's how we came up with "*yimstimagesu*".

I believe very strongly in the preservation and revitalization of indigenous languages in this country, but I also believe in the development of these languages, taking into account the modern context in which they will survive and develop. Have you come across any words in your work that were literally invented?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Absolutely. There's even something like the use of *pimihakan* for "airplane". There's always innovation.

You mentioned that word, *yimstimagesu*. Your elders coined that for you in your capacity. I asked about that.

Actually, we have a Cree word-of-the-day site on Facebook, where over 10,000 people are contributing information from speakers, or helping others who are trying to reclaim the language. We had a bit of a discussion on that. There were a number of different words suggested for "government" at different levels, for "speaker", for "minister" or "MP".

On another project, I believe it was in 2014, for the Winter Olympics, we did a project with a number of Cree speakers in Saskatchewan because they were going to be doing broadcasting for the Winter Olympics. We had a few-day session where we talked about various Olympic sports and tried to gather up words that people had been using or come up with new terms for those. There are certainly things like that.

The late Freda Ahenakew, *kayâhtê*, worked on a number of projects. One of them was a medical terms dictionary. Those are very important works that are being produced in a number of communities. Certainly I believe they've been produced for Innu and East Cree, in which we're just learning how to help doctors and nurses better interact with people by coming up with the terminology, whether it's traditional terminology or innovating new terminology for conditions, for instance, that no one had experience with before. So yes, quite a lot of that goes on in a variety of communities.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I think that a lot of this work will be important for the future of this institution in particular. The first question I asked when I got elected in 2011 was whether I was allowed to speak my language, ask my questions in Cree or do my speeches in Cree. I was told no back then, but I think we're slowly getting there.

Were you aware that the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has been translated into more than 50 indigenous languages?

● (1130)

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I wasn't aware of the exact number. I was certain that it had been translated into some. Do you mean 50 indigenous languages in Canada or across the world?

Mr. Romeo Saganash: That's throughout the world.

One last point is that since I'm not running again in 2019, I guess I can come back to this place and translate the rules and procedures of the House of Commons. There are a lot of words in that book that don't exist, necessarily, in Cree. We still have a lot of work to do. Thank you for your contribution to this committee.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thank you, Mr. Saganash.

We're back over to Mr. Graham.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: Thank you.

It's nice to have you back. You mentioned the Facebook page. While you were talking to Mr. Saganash, I was looking at the Facebook post that you put up a couple of days ago, asking specifically about what to call an MP in Cree. I notice you got quite a few answers. Can you go into those a little more?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Sure. There are a number of words that commonly come up in there, and there are different variations.

One of them, a very basic one is *okimaw*, which is the traditional chief or leader. It has been used for a number of different levels. It can be modified to be *okimakanak*, which is *okimaw*, someone who has come from the territory or is elected. Simply, it's used like *sîpiy*, which is "river", and *sîpîhkân* is a canal.

Okimakanak has been used for "elected official". It tends to be used for the chief of band and council, and there are variations of that. *Okimaw* has also been used to refer to the prime minister. *Kihcôkimâw* is used for "king", the "great chief".

Okimakanak and *kihcôkimâw* are both terms that have been used for “government”, and specifically the Canadian government. There's that type of use. Some have suggested that if we used *okimaw* for prime minister, we could use *okimâsis* for an MP, which is a diminutive form. It's also my wife's family name. There are variations on that, and some have suggested doing the same thing, making an even further diminutive, and using that for provincial governments and MLAs, and so on.

Another word that's commonly used is *nîkân*, “to be in the lead”. It can be used temporally as well, to talk about the future, but *onîkânew* is “leader”, and *onîkânohtêw* is literally “one who walks in front as a leader”. One that has often been used for positions in hierarchies and in business offices is *nîkânapiw*, which is “one who sits in the lead”, so that's another variation.

There are a couple of others that come out. *Owiyasiwêw* is “he or she who makes a law”. So *owiyasiwêw* has been used for “judge”, has been used for “lawyer”, and has also been used for “elected officials” or variations of that. *Oyasowewiyiniw* for “band councillor” is one of the common ways it's used.

The term that Mr. Saganash uses that his elders came up with means “to speak on behalf of others”. That's a fairly common usage as well, although again, across dialects, the root of that, *e-yamit*, “to speak”, and its forms in different dialects, still persist in most dialects, but Plains Cree doesn't use that word specifically anymore. It would have to be replaced with *pekiskwewin*, “to speak”, and *opîkiskwestamâkew*, “one who speaks on behalf of others”. Those are the main ones.

One final one was used by Mr. Ouellette in his testimony: *otapapistamâkew*, which is literally “someone who is sitting in place for others”. It can be used to talk about succession, but it can also be, in the sense that it's meant there, “to sit in place of others as a representative for them”.

● (1135)

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: You mentioned that a word is no longer in use. That leads me to another question, which I've had for a long time, long before I was an MP. I had heard when I was younger that the addition of a writing system changed the evolution of the indigenous languages in Canada. Can you speak a bit about that?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Well I'm not certain that it did. Certainly there are mixed feelings about writing. Obviously these were primarily oral languages, as are all languages in the world except for those that are preserved solely in writing. The oracy, the oral language, is definitely primary and that is what the greatest concern is. Some people believe that writing can help with the retention of languages. Others don't feel that's a priority. There is that potential tension to it.

When we introduce a writing system, of course, spelling becomes the primary issue and whether we are going to standardize that. The other side of the writing system is, when we see a word written as we might write all our materials here at First Nations University, others without training in that writing system might look at the material and think, “Well, that's not how I say it”, because they don't have experience with the writing system. But of course the same thing could be said if we first see English or French written and don't understand how to read it; we might misinterpret what it says and not understand that.

The writing of the languages is a really important point and certainly a point that will come into the logistics of this as well, when we go beyond oral interpretation and need to keep a standard record of the proceedings in these languages. However, as a tool it can help unite the dialects of particular languages, because if you use a more standardized form that doesn't necessarily reflect the exact sounds of each individual dialect, ultimately with education and training in the writing system, it can help unite the different dialects, and a single writing system might be more useful in doing that than phonetic-based writing for each and every individual dialect.

Mr. David de Burgh Graham: I really appreciate these answers. Thank you.

I think I'm out of time again.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): We'll go to Mr. Reid.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Am I right, Mr. Chair, that it's five minutes for this round?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): That's correct.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

Welcome to our guest.

I just wanted to observe, as a starting point, that the debate over the merits of written versus oral language is one that goes back in western culture as well and is recorded because of the fact that obviously, it couldn't take place until there was writing and after that it could be recorded. That is a large part of what is going on in the Socratic dialogue. Socrates operated in a spoken medium and had reservations about this newfangled writing. His followers, Plato and Aristotle, although they agreed with him on many things, disagreed with him on that point, which is probably why we know that Socrates existed at all. Had he won, we might not know that he was around. That's a battle you see going on through any number of cultures as they develop a written system.

This does raise a couple of questions, and I think I'm going to focus my questions entirely on the Cree language or group of languages. Is there a single writing system for everything that can be classified as Cree or, as with Inuit, do you have different systems? They have syllabics for the eastern Arctic and alphabet for the western Arctic. What is the situation with Cree?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: It's very similar to that in that there are two distinct writing systems. The syllabic writing system is in place and used for some dialects or some communities of Cree and preferred in some areas versus alphabetic writing. When we talk about the alphabetic system, there are a number of different forms, some more directly adapted from English or French spelling. There is what we call optimistically the standard Roman orthography for Cree, which has been around for over 40 years now, following a meeting of western Cree speakers in Edmonton in 1973, which adopted a variation of a writing system that had been proposed decades earlier than that.

Much of the material that we try to produce here at First Nations University, the University of Alberta, and so on follows that writing system. There are materials that have been used or have been produced in these writing systems through most of the western dialects. The eastern dialects use a slightly different form for the most part. It's adaptable, but there are minor variations of it across the country. The western dialect is one.

● (1140)

Mr. Scott Reid: The reason this is important is that it is the only language or series of dialects—I'm not quite sure of the right term—for which we are likely to encounter the phenomenon of having multiple members of Parliament at the same time. Certainly it's easily imaginable you have one Inuktitut speaker, but there's really only one territory, and one riding therefore, in which you have Inuktitut as a language. Something similar is true for other languages, with the exception of Cree.

In this situation, two questions arise: Do we need to employ multiple translators or can one translator serve if you have people from different parts of the country where Cree language speakers are serving as members of Parliament? If we're trying to have a written *Hansard*, how ought that to be transcribed? This was a problem for the Nunavut territorial legislature, which chose to use only one—the syllabic system—for its Inuktitut translations, and not the Latin alphabet that's used in the western part of the territory. What are your thoughts on that?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I believe the current translator here, who was translating for Mr. Saganash, did a fine job. I happen to know he's from northwestern Saskatchewan, and he understood the speech of Mr. Saganash from Quebec very well. It's promising to know there are individuals who are able to adapt that much.

We'd have to ask the individuals who have this skill, but I feel it would probably be preferable to have at least two or three different regions we could choose from: the furthest west, the furthest east, and maybe something more central. Again, though, as with things like the vocabulary, this would be a matter of having elders councils who can come together and talk about the distinctions between the languages and see what they feel would be most appropriate for them.

As for the writing systems, we continue to have that debate here on the various strengths and weaknesses of each of the writing systems. The syllabic writing system is very heavily weighted towards phonetics and writing it exactly as it sounds, so people will write words slightly differently, and there has never really been a standardization of that, whether it's including the marking of long vowels versus short vowels or a variety of things that just haven't been standardized. The prospects of standardization for syllabics are far less than they would be for Roman orthography, as I mentioned. A lot of material has been produced in Innu as well, which has essentially a standard orthography.

It would be a matter of, potentially, a standard Roman orthography for the western dialects, excluding Atikamekw, which has its own writing system—I wouldn't want to try to impose anything on the Atikamekw—and then a more eastern-based one for Innu and so on.

There are solutions. It's just that ultimately, community input and elder input would be vital to that.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Blake Richards): Thanks, Mr. Reid.

We'll move now to Ms. Tassi.

Ms. Filomena Tassi (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Dr. Wolvengrey, for your testimony today. It's very helpful.

One of the things you mentioned was that your faculty is almost reduced to half; over the past 20 years you've gone from nine to four. Getting away from the discussion of this being a right, and MP Saganash and other witnesses have presented that argument, do you see any impact with respect to the vitality of the language surviving as a result of it being brought to the House of Commons?

● (1145)

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Yes, I do.

The entire language revitalization movement that we see today, the return to the language, is still encountering many roadblocks. The fewer the roadblocks, or rather, the more the positive stories and positive signs we see can only serve to help move this along.

Much of what we hear today is a backlash for the negative feelings that were engendered towards indigenous languages, even among speakers who are proud of their own language but who wouldn't pass it on to their children because they didn't want their children to experience the same things they had experienced in the schools. That attitude is still alive. There are young people who don't see the value of the language and don't see it being used anywhere.

The more we can provide places where it is being used, where it is being respected, and the more we can show young people that you can do everything within your first language or your parents' language that you can with English or French will simply help to reinforce the importance of a language and raise its prestige.

This is another area in which the writing system can come into play. Right now most people can't see signs in their own language. You know how important that was within Quebec. It's another factor. As I think was pointed out in one of the earlier testimonies, if ministers are starting to speak their indigenous languages within the House, it is going to inspire other people to continue using their languages and potentially to want to run for office and have pride in being able to speak their language there. That in turn will inspire other people in their community and in other communities.

I think every place that we can hear and see the indigenous language is a positive, and this is a very positive step by the House of Commons.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: What is your student population now? How many students are studying indigenous languages?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: They're not studying them as majors or minors, but we have usually on campus here at Regina about 150 students in introductory classes every term, out of the 1,000 students we have at First Nations University and 14,000 at the University of Regina. We also teach at our satellite campuses in Saskatoon and Prince Albert. There are probably about 200 people per term who take Cree classes, and a few more with Saulteaux and Nakota and Dakota.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: How many carry on? Do you have a percentage who would continue in second and third year?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: We offer two introductory classes. Because of the requirements of language within various faculties, we usually have 50% to 75% taking both of the intro classes, but it does not carry on, beyond maybe 10% to 15%, into the second year.

Ms. Filomena Tassi: What is it that motivates students now to take indigenous languages? What do you think the federal government could do to encourage more students, other than introducing the languages into the House of Commons?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: I think one reason students take the languages is that they're simply trying to reconnect with their families, with their culture. There is a very strong desire to reconnect with those things, and language is the means to do so. That is the primary motivation.

We note also that many non-indigenous students are taking at least the introductory languages simply because of interest that has been generated by more knowledge about them.

What the federal government can do, I think, is act on many of the recommendations from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that have to do with language. There's the indigenous languages act, which we've heard about and which is coming.

Many of those recommendations talked about the right to language within the schools or in post-secondary education, as in our institution's supporting the languages with programs. That, however, goes to funding as well. The reduction in our faculty is largely because of the struggles that universities across the country have with funding.

Specifically in our own, we have essentially concentrated on some of the intro level classes for students entering U of R programs. We're not really in a financial position to expand those or offer bursaries to fluent speakers who would like to go into language teaching.

There is a variety of things involving education that support from the federal government would be vital for.

● (1150)

Ms. Filomena Tassi: Thank you.

The Chair: Before we finish off here, let's go quickly to an informal round if there's anyone that has a question that wasn't in the order.

Minister Saganash.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Not yet.

In which dialect did you speak? Which Cree were you speaking? I totally understood everything.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Excellent. It was Plains Cree, and I'm glad to know I enunciated it properly.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: You mentioned in your presentation some of the challenges that we face in attempting to have indigenous languages in Parliament. Are there others that you would like to raise with us?

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Do you mean other challenges? I suppose, again, ultimately, it would be wonderful to have all of the languages of Canada represented in some way. Languages are extremely endangered, and we always hear about Cree and Ojibwa or Anishinaabemowin and Inuktitut as being the safe ones. Recently, we also tend to add Dene to that because of a recognition that, despite the fact that there are maybe 10,000 or 11,000 fluent speakers, there's still language retention in those communities and children learning it. In many communities, we're down to a very few speakers and elderly speakers, and it's not being passed on.

One of the challenges is that we may not be able to act in time to have a point in time where there will be all 60 languages represented, because we may lose many of them. It's not just a matter of bringing the languages into the House of Commons; it's a matter of making sure those languages are still there so that at some point in the future they can come into the House of Commons.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: Thus it is important, I would say, to recognize and have institutions like the Parliament of Canada use indigenous languages. It certainly has a positive effect with the Cree. The regional government in northern Quebec operates in three official languages: Cree, French, and English. It works very well. In fact, I invited the committee to consider having the Cree regional government as witnesses for this study.

That is why I asked about the constitutional status of indigenous languages from the outset. That's going to make the difference between a symbolic use of indigenous languages in Parliament versus the formal recognition of indigenous languages as having status and having a place in this country equal to those for French and English.

Thank you for your presentation.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Wolvengrey, for being with us today. We really appreciate your taking this time and we look forward to working with you in the future.

Mr. Arok Wolvengrey: [*Witness speaks in Cree, interpreted as follows*:]

I thank all of you.

I'm grateful to all of you.

The Chair: *Mahsi*.

Committee members, before we suspend for a minute to set up our other witnesses, when we come back, AFN would like to have some pictures. We don't normally do it during the proceedings, so we'll set up as if we've started, but we won't have officially started, just so they can get some pictures, if that's okay with everyone.

● _____ (Pause) _____

●

● (1200)

The Chair: Welcome back to the 99th meeting of the committee.

We are on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquins.

For our second panel, we are joined by National Chief Perry Bellegarde of the Assembly of First Nations. He is accompanied by Miranda Huron, Director of Languages, and Roger Jones, Special Adviser to the National Chief.

Also appearing on this panel is Ellen Gabriel by video conference from Kanesatake.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel (As an Individual): Thank you, and greetings.

[*Witness speaks in Mohawk*]

The Chair: Thank you.

[*The Chair speaks in Cree*]

For the fist time, we're going to have interpretation into English and French and Cree, back and forth. It will be a little complicated if we run into glitches. We learned some words in Cree in our last hour.

It's great to have the National Chief here. I know he's a very busy man.

You're welcome to have your opening comments.

National Chief Perry Bellegarde (National Chief, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, Mr. Chair and Ellen.

● (1205)

[*Witness speaks in Cree with interpretation, as follows:*]

I speak Cree a little.

I am very thankful. I thank all of you, my friends, my relatives, the men, the women, all of you. I thank all of you.

Chief Child Thunderbird is my name. I am from Little Black Bear. I thank our Creator.

[*English*]

That was a little bit in Cree, and you had the translation.

We don't have Nakota, but I'll say something.

[*Witness speaks in Nakota*]

That was just a little bit in Nakota, as well. We're a Cree Assiniboine tribe back home on Little Black Bear.

[*Witness speaks in Cree*]

I am happy to be here. You heard already that I thanked you all friends and relatives, and the men and women who are here, and I give thanks to the Creator for this beautiful day.

I'll speak slowly because of the translation.

To the members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to share the Assembly of First Nations' perspectives on the use of indigenous languages in proceedings of the House of Commons.

Today I will speak to two things: number one, the state of our first nations languages and the current constitutional context, reconciliation, and the current co-development of a first nations, Inuit, and Métis languages bill; and number two, the question of this study on the use of indigenous languages in the House of Commons in general, and in particular on the prospect of introducing simultaneous interpretation when indigenous languages are spoken during parliamentary proceedings.

I understand this to be the issue here, that other languages, in addition to English and French, can be used in debate, but the Speaker is concerned with maintaining order in such debates.

Your interest in the revitalization of our languages is most welcome. First, I'll speak to the current context, reconciliation, and language revitalization.

Since the 1940s, first nations have expressed concern regarding the decline of our languages, and since the 1980s the Assembly of First Nations chiefs in assembly have passed no fewer than 18 resolutions calling for immediate action to preserve our languages. In 2015, the Assembly of First Nations reinforced this call in our "Closing the Gap" document. It's a document I use to influence the Liberal, Conservative, NDP, and Green Party platforms. I use that document, and I'm going to be using it again because there is another election coming up in October 2019, so it's going to be "Closing the Gap 2" or some other document I'm going to use, something to influence policy platforms.

In December 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau announced to the chiefs in assembly and to all of Canada that the government will enact an indigenous languages act, co-developed with indigenous peoples, with the goal of ensuring the preservation, protection, and revitalization of first nations, Métis, and Inuit languages in this country.

Work at the co-development table towards a first nations, Inuit, and Métis languages bill is well under way, with the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Assembly of First Nations, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and the Métis National Council undertaking this important initiative. Concerted revitalization efforts supported by governments are essential, as no indigenous language in Canada is safe.

First nations strongly support a legislative framework to advance the revitalization, maintenance, protection, and promotion of more than 58 distinct first nations languages and more than 90 distinct dialects.

● (1210)

The right to speak our languages is an inherent constitutional and human right. Section 35 of the Constitution Act of Canada affirms indigenous peoples' language rights. Our language rights are reinforced by the treaties, some of which include provisions for education. We always talk about the spirit and intent of the treaties. In my case, it was, "When the Indians are ready to settle down on the reservation, we'll provide a little red brick schoolhouse and teach your children the cunning of the white man." What does that mean? The spirit and intent to education, does it mean K to 12? We didn't ask for residential schools. We asked for schools, the spirit and intent to education.

Canada as a nation was in part formed through these nation-to-nation treaties with our people. Indigenous languages were used in the making of these treaties. For example, they were used during diplomatic relations in the late 1800s when several treaties were entered into, including the Victorian treaties, the numbered treaties. We also have the Robinson-Huron Treaty. We have the pre-Confederation treaties, the two row wampum treaty, the Douglas Treaties. Our indigenous languages were used.

That's why we say in the numbered treaties, *namoya ninistohten*; I don't understand cede, surrender, and relinquish. I don't understand that line in our treaties.

In June 2008, in the apology to Indian residential school survivors, the federal government acknowledged the lasting and profoundly damaging impact of residential schools on first nations cultures, not only on our culture but our heritage and languages. The process of losing our languages was not borne of indifference; their transmission was and is actively interrupted by government policies in Canada. Today the number of second language learners demonstrates our enduring commitment to our languages.

Restoring our languages plays a role in meaningful reconciliation and healing. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action 13 to 17 speak specifically to our languages and cultures. Taken together with calls to action on education, reconciliation, media, and representation, the TRC describes the diverse aspects of language protection and revitalization. These calls to action reflect section 2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

The UN declaration, in articles 13 and 14, affirms our rights. I remind you all that Canada has expressed its unqualified support for the UN declaration and its full implementation. In September 2017, in Prime Minister Trudeau's speech to the UN General Assembly, he reaffirmed the government's commitment to "co-developing programs to ensure the preservation, protection and revitalization of Métis, Inuit and First Nations languages....working hard...to correct past injustices...".

A first critical step to recognizing and respecting these rights is to revitalize indigenous languages. The status of indigenous languages varies across Canada. Some have only a handful of mother tongue or fluent speakers, while others are widely spoken. My understanding is that expanding the numbers of speakers in any language and in any locale can take 25 years or more with deeply concerted efforts. The vast majority of our languages need these efforts now. It's all about gaining fluency.

By actively recognizing and respecting our rights, we can revitalize our rich and vibrant cultures, languages, and histories to share with our children and with all Canadians. Our languages hold many of our traditions, knowledge, and world views. We need to pass this knowledge on to younger generations and restore a critical mass of speakers.

On this point, though, I will say if you focus on languages, studies have shown that when they're fluent, children know who they are and where they come from. They're therefore more successful in school and therefore more successful in life. Even this language bill and revitalization of indigenous languages is an investment in human capital. That's very fundamental to closing the gap and bringing about reconciliation in Canada.

We understand that this study focuses on the potential use and simultaneous interpretation of indigenous peoples' languages in the House of Commons. Does the Assembly of First Nations support interpretation and translation for first nations members of Parliament who wish to use their respective language? Yes, we support that. Speaking in the House of Commons in their first nations language is their constitutional right.

● (1215)

There was a question earlier about how that will help fluency. It's all about awareness, education, and promotion. Seeing the vitality and having the House of Commons say that this is important is going to be reflected in and have an impact on policy, legislation, and programs not only current but *ati-nîkân*, in the future, down the road. So it's very important that this happen.

Allow me to succinctly address your fears. We understand the practical concerns associated with this.

At any one point and at any one time, the House of Commons, however, would only have a few first nations MPs who are fluent in their respective language.

Right now there are three that I know of: Romeo Saganash, Cree, speaking a slightly different dialect, which we can understand; Robert-Falcon Ouelette, Plains Cree—he is from Red Pheasant, and we can understand; and Georgina Jolibois, Dene.

[*Witness speaks in Dene*]

I always like saying that, “people of the land”. *Nezo* is good.

There are three MPs.

Given the relatively few fluent speakers of most of our languages, we know that providing translation and interpretation in all first nations languages at all times is not currently realistic. We know that most of our languages need a holistic approach to concerted revitalization efforts, from adult immersion to preschool to the master mentor-apprentice programs and language houses, all designed to revitalize our languages within particular locales.

We need to turn out second language speakers who in turn will restore the natural way that language is taught in the home and in communities and then is reinforced in educational institutions. Some languages, however, already enjoy being in the phase of language maintenance and deserve to be used in our public government institutions as languages of business. This deserves support. We know of the practicality involved in this, and together we will figure out how to do it.

Parliament is one place to bring parity and recognition to our languages. As described by various witnesses and in the briefing, there are domestic and international precedents that could serve as a useful resource. Representing indigenous languages in the House would demonstrate Canada's commitment to representing all Canadians, and more specifically first nations as original peoples.

I have always said that our 58-plus indigenous languages should be viewed as Canada's national treasures. They are not spoken anywhere else. There's no big language called Nakota or country called Nakota anywhere else in the world. Here it's spoken. Dene, Blackfoot, Mi'kmaq: there are so many beautiful languages in addition to English and French. There is beautiful English language, beautiful French language, but we have 58-plus indigenous languages that should really be viewed as national treasures of Canada.

The ways in which indigenous languages are used in the House of Commons should complement the policy orientation and ongoing work to develop the indigenous languages bill. Given the fact that no indigenous language is safe, revitalization and recovery is the primary focus. As the number of fluent speakers grows, I hope the number of indigenous voices in Parliament will also grow.

I just did a presentation to the Senate. One senator is Mi'kmaq. There are no MPs who speak Mi'kmaq in the House of Commons. There is a non-indigenous MP who speaks a little Mohawk. He was here. I don't know where he is, but he would be speaking Mohawk. That's good. I always say that integration can work both ways. That's a good thing.

We're looking forward to continuing collaboration with Canadian Heritage, ITK, and MNC as we shift to the next tasks on indigenous language legislation, including firming up ideas for legislation, mapping out policy and program implications, conducting further direct engagement sessions over the summer, co-drafting a joint core decision document setting out our shared understanding of policy and legislative objectives and options and their supporting rationale for eventual decisions by federal cabinet and indigenous leadership.

We want this bill introduced in September or October of this year. We fully realize that there will be an election in October 2019. We don't want this indigenous language bill to die anywhere in the system. We want to see it introduced and passed, hopefully unanimously by everybody in the House of Commons and the Senate. We want to get this done.

Among recommendations, number one is that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs strike the balance between, first, giving profile in the House of Commons to the indigenous languages as the original languages of Canada, and second, the practicalities involved with providing translation and interpretation services, which we can work out together.

● (1220)

Supporting the revitalization and normalization—the key word is “normalization”—of indigenous languages will be an important step toward meaningful reconciliation between Canada and first nations peoples.

With that, I'll say thank you.*Kinanaskomitin*. I look forward to your questions.

Ekosi. That's it.

The Chair: *Mahsi cho*.

Now we'll go to Ms. Gabriel. Do you have some opening remarks for us?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: [*Witness speaks in Mohawk*]

I'm making it short. Don't panic. I'm going to translate what I just said. I basically said a greeting in my language. I'm part of the Turtle Clan from Kanesatake, the Kanienkehaka Nation. I wanted to greet all the natural life forces, the Creator, and mother earth on this fine day.

I want to thank you for inviting me to speak on this important issue. I work in language and in culture here in Kanesatake. That is my day job. I am an activist outside of my work.

These are really important issues we are talking about, as Chief Bellegarde has said, in regard to reconciliation. It would be an important gesture on the part of the government to make a policy that allows indigenous parliamentarians to express themselves in their first language.

As mentioned, the TRC's calls to action support the use of indigenous languages in this country. As well, many international human rights treaty bodies require that all UN member states take action in collaboration with indigenous peoples to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I know that Parliament is grappling with how to implement this major international human rights instrument in all aspects of its constitution, but given the state of affairs we are in, the state of our languages, this cannot happen soon enough. These same international treaty bodies have indicated repeatedly to states that reform to laws and policies supports states to conform to international human rights standards. As the first peoples of this land, indigenous people have had the very essence of their identity assaulted by colonization and assimilation. One of those important pillars that were assaulted was our language, our mother tongues, which have been devalued and are usually an afterthought in regard to what constitutes indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination.

We are still grappling with the effects of Indian residential schools in our communities. While this discussion is to help indigenous members of Parliament express themselves in their language, one would think that in a country that purports to uphold human rights, there would be a short discussion on this, and a granting of this without question as an opportunity of reconciliation for indigenous peoples and their parliamentarians who are voted in to represent them.

Of course, everything comes at a financial cost. We know that from experience in the colonial Indian Act that affects the reality of indigenous peoples. For many millions of indigenous peoples who have either gone to Indian residential school or are intergenerational survivors, they have felt shame in learning to speak their language. However, for those children and youth who are immersed in a globalized society, which is focused totally on the Internet and what it has to say, it is important for them to hear their own language spoken within these walls that you have.

In this area of reconciliation, indigenous languages discussions in Parliament are vital to that spirit of reconciliation of Canada's colonial past of genocide. Reconciliation must be done with sincerity that is genuine, respectful, and honourable, not by repackaging assimilation and colonization in a nicer, neater package. There remain a vast number of issues before us all as indigenous peoples and we attempt to undo the chains of assimilation and colonization.

As we face challenges like climate change, these complex thought processes in our languages will enrich the discussions in Parliament by indigenous parliamentarians using their language, because our languages are not vague. They contain a wealth of indigenous traditional knowledge, helping us to understand how we are related to the natural world and how important it is to care for mother earth, our homelands, and our resources for this generation and for future generations.

● (1225)

Indigenous languages are diverse, as has been mentioned, but we are in crisis mode. The fluent speakers who think in the language and understand the subtleties of traditional knowledge must be supported by recruitment of new speakers. As Minister Joly stated in a meeting in Montreal this past February, the Government of Canada acknowledges that regardless of the current state of any language in Canada, whether they're considered strong or not, all languages are threatened. As UNESCO has stated, indigenous languages are most threatened in Canada.

The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues this year talked about a plan of action for the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. According to the note by the secretariat, one of its major objectives is to improve the quality of life for indigenous peoples through the reaffirming of cultural and linguistic continuity. Its three thematic aims include support for the revitalization of indigenous languages in practically every sphere of society.

However, revitalization need not have any borders. In fact, these objectives require use of a wider range of services and technologies to assist in improving the everyday use of indigenous languages. This includes here at this very place, where genocidal policies were enacted and implemented, and where the shame of speaking our languages was embedded in the psyche of indigenous peoples because of Indian residential schools, of which we are still feeling the impacts.

Indigenous peoples are required to learn and utilize colonial languages like French and English in all aspects of their lives in order to survive in this globalized world, thus causing many parents to disregard the importance of their language in strengthening a child's identity. If indigenous peoples are supported in the use of their languages in Parliament, it sends a strong signal to our youth that our ancient precious languages are indeed validated and of worth in today's contemporary society. If there is sincerity in government statements that they wish to help and respect indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination using the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as the framework of reconciliation, then it is imperative that Parliament implement a policy that provides support to enhance the use of indigenous languages in its chamber.

Section 35 to me is an empty box, because in many respects our rights are not clearly defined. It is common practice for Canada to force us into the courts, which narrowly define our inherent rights according to the crown's assumed sovereignty. The reason for this is the ongoing colonization and assimilation of indigenous peoples under Canada's Indian Act, and under its policies and legislation.

The fact that reconciliation is presently based on the terms and criteria that Canada has set out and not those of indigenous peoples is a reflection that colonization continues. Therefore, I urge members not to miss this opportunity, which will not only complement this spirit of reconciliation but as well bring one of hundreds of thousands of government policies and legislation and attitudes in line with the spirit of the UN declaration, which protects, promotes, and strengthens indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination.

I just want to mention outcome three in the UN Permanent Forum's statement that indigenous languages strengthen national regional capacities to access mainstream indigenous languages, and as far as possible to integrate them into national policies, strategic plans, and regulatory frameworks.

I must caution that any agreement or any policies that are changed, whether by legislation or by other means, must be done in our languages, for our people to understand the concepts, to reflect the spirit of our obligations according to our indigenous customary laws, to protect and respect our homelands upon this beautiful mother earth, and for all our relations upon whom we rely.

I thank you very much for listening to me today. I look forward to further questions and discussion.

[*Witness speaks in Mohawk*]

● (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, both, for very helpful opening speeches. *Merci*. *Mahsi cho*. *Gunalchéesh*.

We'll start out with some questions from Mr. Scott Simms.

Mr. Scott Simms (Coast of Bays—Central—Notre Dame, Lib.): Thank you.

Thank you to all our witnesses. It's good to see you again.

“Use of Indigenous Languages in Proceedings of the House of Commons” is obviously the name of the study, but I'd like to pull back from that for just a moment. I want to talk about language revitalization so that we can come to terms with where we are going, particularly for indigenous youth.

I'm from central Newfoundland. It's the middle part of the island, unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq and of course the legendary Beothuk.

Recently, we funded a program in Miawpukek with Chief Mi’sel Joe to help integrate the Mi’kmaq language into the school curriculum. It is a wonderful first step, as was described to me, but as a member of Parliament, I need to understand where we go next.

This is where I come to you both. There are some things that worry me about the next step.

Ms. Gabriel, you talked about people who feel there is shame in our language for some indigenous...and probably for our youth. I hope that disappears. Recruitment of speakers is another part of it.

I'll just leave my part at that, and I will get back to the House of Commons part in a moment. I'm worried that we will not be able to recruit enough speakers. Hopefully, we can get shame in our language out of the conversation before we start teaching our children to reclaim their heritage.

Chief Bellegarde, I will start with you.

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: Thanks, Scott, for that.

I'm glad you brought up the roles of the provinces. They have a big role to play. It's not only the federal government.

We're working on the federal legislation, which is good. Again, we always say that we want to keep promoting there, but look across Canada. The Northwest Territories passed a law to recognize the 11 Dene languages as founding languages of the Northwest Territories. Why can't that happen in every province and territory? It can happen. Why can't that happen in Saskatchewan, in Alberta, in B.C., and in Newfoundland?

You're introducing it in the provincial curriculum. That's fine, but you have to put the resources in place as well, because that's part of the issue. It's good to have a law, but if you don't back it up by policies, programs, or resources, it doesn't mean anything. It's starting to happen. That awareness is very important.

I can only share this one story about the acceptance and validation of language. There are over 50 different nations or tribes, and they're all special and unique. They're all at different levels in terms of their language, in terms of promotion, preservation, and enhancement. Some are not bad, but there are some in fear of being wiped out, so you have to apply a different strategy depending where they are at.

To get this pride back, this is the best example of reconciliation action that I can share with people across Canada, and it happened in North Bay, Ontario. It happened between the Nipissing First Nation and the Catholic school board in the town of North Bay. The kids had to be bused from the reserve into town. They wanted the national chief and Chief Scott McLeod to witness what was going on in this Catholic school board. They wanted to show what was going on.

We went into town, to this Catholic school, to a grade 4 class. We walked in. There was drumming going on. We were welcomed with a drum song. There was a smudging going on. Those were two things we saw. In this grade 4 class, there were 14 students. Eight were first nations students and the other six were non-first nations in this grade 4 class in a Catholic school. There was drumming, smudging, and then they all started speaking Ojibwa, every one of them, including the non-indigenous kids. They said their names, such as, “Perry Bellegarde,” [*Witness speaks in Ojibwa*] “North Bay,” [*Witness speaks in Ojibwa*], “I live in North Bay, and my name is....” Everyone of them did that.

You could see the pride and the validation on every one of those students' faces. It was such a powerful moment. All the adults were crying. I was crying. The chairman of the school board was crying. The chief was crying. It was acceptance and validation that learning Ojibwa, learning Anishinaabemowin is equally important as learning English and French. That was in the Catholic school system, in a grade 4 class in North Bay, Ontario. Getting that pride back; you see examples like that.

The most important thing was that the non-indigenous students weren't rolling their eyes and saying, “Why are we learning this?” They were loving it. They were embracing it. It was validation that this is good. You could feel the energy, the pride, and the acceptance, not only among first nations children but also among the non-first nations children. To me, that's what you're trying to get to because that's peaceful coexistence and respect.

We're not downplaying English or French; it's the acceptance that all our indigenous languages are equally and vitally important to bring about reconciliation. That's a powerful example. That's where we need to get to.

● (1235)

Mr. Scott Simms: Ms. Gabriel.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: It's a really important question.

In working at the cultural centre, what was developed in collaboration with the education centre here is we recruited seven youth to learn the language full-time—four days a week, mind you. We would have liked to have more. What we're doing is providing funding as payment. They're getting paid to learn our language because that's what needs to be done.

Our languages face a challenge because of Canada's linguistic duality and recognition of French and English. It's the only way we're going to see recruitment of new speakers. It's not enough to learn your numbers or your colours. It's a very complex and rich form of expression. Because it's been devastated so much by Indian residential schools and the mentality that has followed Indian residential schools as part of their impact, we need to provide those opportunities. Those opportunities are for people to learn full-time, like a job, five days a week, and to have those opportunities for the children to be able to have a curriculum in their languages.

I want to talk about funding. Funding should go directly to the cultural centres. It should go directly to language revitalization. It should not go to a middleman—and with all due respect to Chief Bellegarde—not to a national aboriginal organization to give the funding out. Our languages need that help.

The other part of funding is the exhaustive requirements for reporting, whether it's financial, whether it's for activities. We have been going on the basis of the needs of the government and what's the theme of the year. Government needs to let us decide what our needs are, how we're going to approach this. We're always trying to tick the box that the government creates. In order to get rid of that shame that you were talking about, we need to elevate the language as an important part of our identity. We need the recruitment of new speakers.

In my community we speak the oldest dialect of Kanienkeha. Kanienkeha is the language. Kanienkehaka are “the people of the flint”. Most of our speakers are 60 and over. Those are the first language speakers, which means the children are not speaking the language. Unless the children see that it's important or the youth see that it's important, it's just going to remain something as an activity for bingo, or to learn the colours, or to learn what an animal is. Any changes in language revitalization must be based on the needs, and on the front line must be those elders, those fluent speakers.

Let's forget about administrative costs, and let's get the work done, because we don't have the time anymore.

Thank you for your question.

Mr. Scott Simms: Thank you, Ms. Gabriel.

The Chair: Thank you, Scott. *Merci*. *Mahsi cho*.

Grand Chief Bellegarde, you'd be happy to know that my nine-year-old daughter's favourite class in Whitehorse is Southern Tutchone.

Now we'll go to Mr. Nater.

● (1240)

Mr. John Nater (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you to our guests for joining us today. There has been fascinating testimony throughout the study, but particularly today.

One thing I found interesting is hearing how different jurisdictions deal with simultaneous translation, whether it was Iqaluit or the Northwest Territories. Mr. Saganash brought up the example of the Cree regional government. We're hoping to hear from them at some point during the study.

I'm curious about whether at the Assembly of First Nations there are services provided for translation during your proceedings, and what languages might be used during your meetings and your proceedings.

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: It's a really good question. Thank you for that.

We have a chiefs assembly coming up here, on May 1 and 2.

I've been on the AFN for 30-plus years, and usually the translation is English and French. Not once have I witnessed, in the AFN chiefs meetings, translation in our indigenous languages, not once.

Come to the meeting next Tuesday. You're going to see it for the first time. We're going to have speakers from our chiefs committee on languages ask the Minister of Heritage questions. One will ask in Mohawk. One will ask in Mi'kmaq. One will ask in Nakota. One will ask in Dene. We're going to have that, and the translation will be there.

That will be the first time ever in the history of the Assembly of First Nations that we use our own indigenous languages to question the minister. We're doing it for that very point, that we're diverse. It's not just Cree, Nehiyawak. We have 58. They all are important.

That's why it's so important to get the bill in place, and to start working toward fluency. In our case back home, if you don't have your language, you don't do ceremony.

[*Witness speaks in Cree with interpretation, as follows:*]

I use a pipe and I pray.

[*English*]

To pray with the pipe, you need your language. That world view is so important. It's your identity, your connection. It's vital to us as indigenous peoples.

It's linked to self-determination. I make this point all the time. There are five elements: your own languages, your own lands, your own laws, your own peoples, your own identifiable forms of government.

If you lose language, how do you know you're Cree, Nehiyawak, Dene Suline, Anishinaabemowin, Mi'kmaq, Southern Tutchone? Is it because your status card says so? No, that language is so vital to self-determination. That's why we focus so much on bringing this back up.

Again, that's the link. I wanted to make those points. They're very important.

Mr. John Nater: That's great, and I'm glad to hear that.

Perhaps you would be willing to provide us with a report back of how the translation works at your chiefs meeting and any suggestions that come out of that. I think it would be fascinating for this committee to see how the success of that meeting went, having the four indigenous languages translated.

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: Oh yes, it's interpreters. Get the right interpreters.

Mr. John Nater: That actually leads into my next question. Where have you gone to hire the interpreters for that meeting?

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: We're relying on our chiefs committee on languages. When you come to a chiefs committee on languages, boy, you have the different tribes being spoken. We're relying on their recommendations.

Again, for example, if Romeo's speaking in the House of Commons, he's speaking Cree. He should bring in proper interpreters for that dialect.

Georgina Jolibois speaks Dene. You should ask her who she brings in for that dialect.

They need a base, a pool to draw from.

It's not hard to get those three MPs who are speaking to find the proper person to bring in. That should happen.

I just want to say as well that in your kits the leave-behind is this. For all of your questions and comments, read this. We did our regional roll-ups, our regional forums, and questions and comments on what should be next steps. What do the people want? It's in this report. This is going to be the basis for providing direction on this legislation.

Again, the AFN has a lot of work to do.

This is going to be the first time ever in our languages. You're going to hear six of them, anyway. There's another 50-plus that we have to get to.

● (1245)

Mr. John Nater: The document that you're citing, was that done at the request of the minister as consultation, or was that something the AFN undertook independently?

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: It was the AFN, and in partnership with.... We did this as our regional forum, in terms of getting out. Everybody always gets scared, “Oh no, legislation, what's going to happen? We have to take it out to the people.” We did that.

We had regional sessions, and we had language experts, people who had been working in this language promotion preservation for years with no support. We wanted to hear from them, because I agree. I agree with Ellen. It's not up to AFN to get any money to do this. It's out to the communities, out to the people.

It's all about getting fluency back. We totally support that.

Mr. John Nater: Yes, and one of the challenges we've heard is that the fluency often with some of the more critically endangered languages rests with the grandparents and the great-grandparents of a generation, rather than the young people. Therefore, I think the comment about fluency among young people, which both of you have mentioned, is important.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Can I make a comment?

The Chair: Ms. Gabriel wants to speak.

Mr. John Nater: Yes, please.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: I heard most of your intervention in French, actually, so I tried to get the gist of what you were saying.

At one of the last meetings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Montreal, the director of the cultural centre here did a translation in Kanienkeha, because she is a first language speaker and she thinks in that language. The cultural centres have a wealth of resources, of elders who are able to provide translation, so I'm glad that you're including me alongside Chief Bellegarde, because I know that he has a passion for the language.

That is the other group that has a passion for the language and has been nickel-and-diming our projects.... We have project money for our languages, and the cultural centres are where you find the experts. That's who the people work with. They are the experts. With the subtleties of translation, just as in any language, you need to have a person who knows how to change those ideas into what needs to be expressed for everybody.

My language, Kanienkeha, is 80% verbs, so you really need to understand what action is being required and the concept that people are using. As one elder said, it took over 150 years to get our languages to the state in which they are today. It might take another 100 years for us to be able to restore and maintain our languages, but it needs to be done in a way that fully supports the work being done at the community level.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

We'll now go to Mr. Saganash.

Mr. Romeo Saganash: [*Member speaks in Cree, interpreted as follows:*]

Of all the things that are talked about, this means a lot, the way I see these things today. I thank all of you who have come here.

[*English*]

Ellen, it's good to see you. It hasn't even been 12 hours since the last time I saw you, in Montreal last night, but it's always a pleasure to have you in our different committees here in Ottawa.

I'll start with what I think is an easy question, for both of you.

National Chief Bellegarde, you talked about this indigenous languages act, which should be introduced, as you say, perhaps sometime this fall. I share that wish. You talked about co-development. I make a distinction between co-development and co-drafting. I'd like you to explain exactly where things are with that proposed act, because I hadn't been consulted on it until sometime last week.

Ellen, I'll address the same question to you. What has been your role in the development of the proposed indigenous languages act? Beyond the funding that you mentioned in your presentation, what other aspects would you like to see in the act? For instance, should this act recognize indigenous languages in this country as official languages? Both of you have talked about the founding languages, but I make a distinction between a founding language and recognition of an official language in constitutional terms.

National Chief, maybe you could start.

● (1250)

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: [*Witness speaks in Cree*]

Thank you so much, my friend, for the question about the difference between co-development and co-drafting.

Mr. Roger Jones sits at that table. He's also legal counsel. He's an individual who helped, for example, with co-developing or co-drafting the specific claims independent tribunal a few years back. We wanted someone with experience. I'm going to ask him to make some comments in response to that very good question from Romeo about how we are working with the Department of Canadian Heritage in getting this difficult task of indigenous language legislation done.

[*Witness speaks in Cree*]

He's a fluent Ojibwa speaker, too, but he's not too shabby for Anishnaabe, as we say.

Mr. Roger Jones (Special Advisor to the National Chief, Assembly of First Nations): Thank you, National Chief and members.

I'm pleased to be here and accompanying the national chief in his appearance on this critical issue. For us, at least through the Assembly of First Nations, it's been almost a year since we began focusing on this co-development exercise, which is defined by a certain set of principles that were adopted by all the parties last June.

It is a work in progress, there's no doubt about it, because this is generally something that doesn't happen regularly. There are also the rules around confidentiality, the parliamentary privilege right, and the reality that parliamentarians are the ones who normally see the first version of draft legislation, aside from the executive. We grapple with those kinds of issues. We'll figure them out as we get to that bridge.

What we've done to this point is that, based on the work that the Assembly of First Nations did in going out and engaging with our people to receive direction and instruction on what people expect should be in the legislation, we have moved that forward in the form of principles that we have worked out together with the Métis representation on our working group, with the Inuit representation, and with Canada's representation. We have four parties in this working group process. We're being methodical about how to move this all forward in order to really capture a consensus, as much as possible, among all parties.

We're at a point where we have agreed on a set of principles that should guide the preparation of the legislation. We need to transform those at some point into something that begins to take shape as legislative content. Ultimately, there will be a stage where there's drafting. We don't anticipate that it's going to happen for maybe three to four months. What we have discussed by way of the working group is that we have to facilitate a way in which the non-governmental parties—the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis, and the Inuit—can actually be included together with the federal government's drafting people, who normally come out of the Department of Justice.

We will obviously need, or the government will need, authorization from the executive in order to facilitate that process. In anticipation of doing that, we are trying to figure out what is the best way to be able to actually achieve really that co-drafting. One thing that I think we will also have worked on prior to that actual drafting exercise is that normally the drafting exercise is informed by drafting instructions, as we know. That will also have a role in setting out for the executive's consideration an approval to move that process forward.

I hope that answers your question.

● (1255)

Mr. Romeo Saganash: I know my time is up, Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Gabriel, did you want to comment on that?

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: Yes. I think it's an important question on the role that I've been involved in.

Romeo, it's good to see you within a span of 12 hours as well. It's always a pleasure.

One of the things that I think is really important to know is that I was involved in the engagement sessions. I finally got a look at the report. I think that one of the things that legislation needs to acknowledge is the ongoing assimilation of English and French in the schools and the serious damage that it's done. Andrea Bear Nicholas talks about the report and that the legislation should not be based solely on the sessions, but on existing documentation. She quotes Tove Skutnabb-Kangas' work, that there are these subtleties about the language that is being used and that indigenous languages are to be funded and available to all.

I think what really needs to be done is immersion so that all indigenous children have the ability to access their languages from preschool to grade 6. There's a wealth of English and French sources in popular culture that they can use. There can be after-school activities for learning how to write English and French, but it's important that children be able to speak that language. That needs to be considered when it comes to the funding of indigenous languages and the maintenance of indigenous languages, because English and French are still going to be impacting any kind of work that is done in the communities. It should be first and primarily for indigenous communities.

In everything that I've seen in grants by the Government of Quebec and the Government of Canada, it always needs to be accessed by the public. I agree that perhaps we should go outside our communities to have people speaking our language, which is fine, but if we look at the state of it and why it's endangered, we know those first language speakers are tired now. We need those young people to step up to the plate. The only way we're going to do it is if we're able to focus primarily on that recruitment and the activities of recruitment for those young speakers. They're asking too much. We're not at the stage of French and English. As Chief Bellegarde mentioned, there's no country to go to. For French and English, you can go to Europe to find it or you can go south of the border, but for us, our languages are alive in our community through those first language speakers. We need to make sure that it is protected and that it is provided the needed support so that eventually, we can open it to the public.

We have two non-indigenous people coming to our classes. We've opened it up to people from outside of the community, but I can't stress enough the challenges and the hardship we face because of project funding and Indian residential school mentality within the communities. I was told that Canadian Heritage would be doing engagement sessions, not consultations. I made that clear to Minister Joly. When they start in June, are these going to be consultations? She said no, that they are going to be engagement. That means they don't have to accommodate our concerns.

That's where I have serious concerns in regard to how this is being developed. Yes, there are four parties, but who is really representing the cultural centres in this? Who is really representing those first language speakers, and the women, and some of the men, who have been nickel-and-diming the language revitalization in our communities for decades? That's where I think that, if it's really co-development, you need to include those people who have been at the front lines all this time.

[*Witness speaks in Mohawk*]

Thank you very much.

● (1300)

The Chair: Our time is up, but I'll ask our witnesses if they'd like to make any closing comments.

Go ahead, Chief Bellegarde.

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: Again, thanks for the opportunity. I know we got off track a little, but we want to see interpreters in the House of Commons. For sure, that will send a strong statement and a strong message.

There are something like 338 members, so eventually you might get more MPs who speak more than just Dene, Cree, Mi'kmaq, and Mohawk, and that should be accommodated. That would send a strong statement about reconciliation. I don't think that's an insurmountable task at all. We have the resources. We have people who can provide that skill to the House of Commons.

I just want to say as well that Tracey Herbert at the First Peoples' Cultural Council in British Columbia has a good model. Out of the 58 plus indigenous languages, 34 are in British Columbia. They have a good model for revitalization that should be looked upon to learn from.

For the lobbying, it's not just the feds. The B.C. government put $50 million in its provincial budget for language promotion and revitalization. Each province can do things too.

I just want to thank you for this opportunity. Please read this report. We want to get the legislation done properly by the fall so it meets the proper time frames to get this done.

[*Witness speaks in Cree*]

The Chair: *Merci*.

Ms. Gabriel.

Ms. Ellen Gabriel: I don't know if I can really add to anything that's been said in this period. I want to salute Chief Bellegarde.

[*Witness speaks in Mohawk*]

It's nice to see you, if only virtually. Thank you.

Really, as Mr. Bellegarde said, we might be a bit off track, but it's really important for a policy to be created to provide simultaneous translation to any person of indigenous ancestry, to give them the ability to speak in their first language. The opportunity to express their subtle and complex ways and cosmovision within Canada's Parliament is not just part of reconciliation, it is part of decolonization.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): I have one quick question for you, Chief.

I can't leave today without really understanding properly why this next meeting you are having is going to be the first where you're using translation for the indigenous languages.

Why hasn't it happened yet? We're having this discussion about the practicality of doing it here in the House of Commons, and I want to know if that is one of the reasons you have not done it thus far.

National Chief Perry Bellegarde: Yes, that's part of it. Out of the 634 first nations across Canada, for example, we have 58 different nations and tribes. It's very complex. We have one Lakota first nation out of those 634. Did you see *Dances with Wolves*? They're speaking Lakota. If the chief from that community and that first nation wants to speak Lakota, that's their nation; that's their tribe.

In many cases, though, because of colonization and the residential schools, many of the chiefs' first language is not their language. That's what we see. That's how far that residential school system has hurt our languages: even our elected chiefs don't have that first nations language as their first language. Our AFN is an assembly of chiefs, but a lot of them don't speak their first language. That's why.

We're doing it for the first time now because we are trying to educate people that at least we can do it in the Assembly of First Nations. We're supposed to be an assembly of first nations—indigenous nations, not Indian Act bands. We're trying to wake ourselves up to get back to our identity and our language.

That's why it's the first time we're doing it, and we want to keep doing it so that eventually there will be nothing but indigenous languages spoken, and you'll have 58 knobs on your earphone. That's the goal.

Voices: Oh, oh!

● (1305)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I hope so. Good luck.

The Chair: Thank you, everyone.

For committee members who weren't at the last meeting, remember that on May 8, we're doing our recommendations on electronic petitions.

Thank you to the interpreter, Kevin Lewis.

The meeting is adjourned.