



HOUSE OF COMMONS
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CANADA

RECLAIMING, REVITALIZING, MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN CANADA

**Report of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and
Northern Affairs**

Jenica Atwin, Chair

**JUNE 2023
44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION**

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NOTICE TO READER

Reports from committees presented to the House of Commons

Presenting a report to the House is the way a committee makes public its findings and recommendations on a particular topic. Substantive reports on a subject-matter study usually contain a synopsis of the testimony heard, the recommendations made by the committee, as well as the reasons for those recommendations.

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has the honour to present its

NINTH REPORT

Pursuant to its mandate under Standing Order 108(2), the committee has studied Indigenous languages and has agreed to report the following:

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LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of their deliberations committees may make recommendations which they include in their reports for the consideration of the House of Commons or the Government. Recommendations related to this study are listed below.

Recommendation 1

That the Government of Canada refer to the Board of Internal Economy a request to find ways to accommodate simultaneous interpretation in more than three languages during committee meetings when requested by either members or witnesses speaking an Indigenous language. 7

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Canada provide funding for the promotion of Indigenous languages within music and ceremonies to ensure that Indigenous songs are created and used as resources for future generations..... 13

Recommendation 3

That the Government of Canada’s national strategies and action plans for Indigenous language reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening reflect different regional and local contexts by incorporating flexible and diverse funding and programming approaches..... 20

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Recommendation 6

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Recommendation 7

That the Government of Canada, in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis, prepare and introduce in Parliament amendments to the *Indigenous Languages Act* to: clearly state in section 5 that protecting all Indigenous languages in Canada is one of the purposes of the Act; consider the creation of more mandatory obligations for Canada under the Act; and amend sections 26(a)–26(d) and 27(1) to enable the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages to consider complaints related to programming involving blended or joint funding..... 24

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That the Government of Canada consider the importance of healing through the revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultures in the design of Indigenous languages programming. 24

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Recommendation 10

That the Government of Canada take immediate action to ensure the provision of adequate, sustainable, long-term, and distinctions-based funding to support the Indigenous-led reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages in Canada; and that the Government of Canada report back to the committee within one year on efforts made to achieve this goal..... 28

Recommendation 11

That the Government of Canada work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations to ensure that Indigenous languages teachers are compensated in the same way as teachers in the public education system; and that additional funding be provided to train Indigenous languages teachers..... 29

Recommendation 12

That the Government of Canada explore how to ensure that compensation received by Indigenous Elders for language teaching work does not lead to clawbacks of, or reduction in, Old Age Security payments and the Guaranteed Income Supplement. 29

Recommendation 13

That the Government of Canada work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners and relevant stakeholders, such as provincial and territorial governments, to determine the best approach to reconcile Canada’s official bilingualism with the recognition that Indigenous languages are the first languages of this land..... 30

Recommendation 14

That the Government of Canada incentivize Indigenous languages within the public service through bonuses, promotions, nominations and other means..... 30

Recommendation 15

That the Government of Canada work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners to identify barriers to Indigenous language immersion and ways to overcome them..... 32

Recommendation 16

That the Government of Canada work with provinces and territories, and First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners, to better coordinate the work being done to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages across the country. 33



RECLAIMING, REVITALIZING, MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN CANADA

INTRODUCTION

Before colonization, hundreds of languages and dialects thrived in what is now called North America.¹ Today, there are less than a hundred Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada, many of which are on the verge of disappearing. Language extinction is not only a cultural loss; it is also detrimental to a people’s identity, well-being, and health. It is also important to note that the loss of Indigenous languages in Canada is not accidental; it is largely the result of discriminatory and assimilationist policies and actions by past governments.²

In June 2019, the *Indigenous Languages Act* (hereafter, “the ILA”) received Royal Assent.³ In its preamble, the ILA recognizes that “a history of discriminatory government policies and practices, in respect of, among other things, assimilation, forced relocation, the Sixties Scoop and residential schools, were detrimental to Indigenous languages and contributed significantly to the erosion of those languages.”

On 21 November 2022, the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs of House of Commons (“the committee”) adopted the following motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee undertake a study with the objective of analyzing the relative success of the government, measured by results achieved and compared to the objectives set out in the *Indigenous Languages Act* (which received Royal Assent on June 21, 2019) which aims to assist Indigenous people in

1 Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, *Our Two Official Languages Over Time*, 1996; National Association of Friendship Centres, *Our Languages, Our Stories: Towards the Revitalization and Retention of Indigenous Languages in Urban Environments*, 2018, p. 3.

2 Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, *Briefing document on SGIG language expenditure need model*, Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 30 January 2023.

3 *Indigenous Languages Act*, S.C. 2019, c. 23; for more information on the Act, see: Isabelle Brideau and Brittany Collier, *Legislative Summary of Bill C-91: An Act Respecting Indigenous Languages*, Publication No. 42-1-C91-E, Library of Parliament, 31 December 2019.



reclaiming, revitalizing, maintaining and strengthening Indigenous languages.

That the committee invites to appear, notably, the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, experts, Indigenous leaders and government officials to monitor the progress of the implementation of the Act and, to this end, that the committee hold a minimum of four meetings; and that the committee report its findings and recommendations to the House, and pursuant the Standing Order 109, the committee request that the government table a comprehensive response to the report.⁴

As part of this study, the committee heard from 21 witnesses over four meetings, including community leaders, Elders and residential school survivors.⁵ The committee also received nine written briefs from individuals, communities and organizations. Witnesses shared similar concerns with the committee, which are explored in this report. They also proposed solutions to the problems they identified. Throughout this report, the committee is using their insights to make recommendations to the Government of Canada.

The committee wishes to thank everyone who participated in this study. Members of the committee were particularly moved and humbled by having the privilege of hearing many witnesses speak in their Indigenous language. During this study, the committee heard testimony in Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqey, Inuktitut, Hul'q'umi'num', Northern Michif, Swampy Cree, Plains Cree, Wendat, Lílwat, and Secwepemctsin, in addition to English and French.

Since the start of the 44th Parliament, one member has been intervening in this committee in their own Indigenous language. During this study, however, this member had to stop speaking their language to allow interpretation in other Indigenous languages, as this service can only be provided in three languages simultaneously. Aware that the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories can provide interpretation in

4 House of Commons, Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs [INAN], [Minutes of Proceedings](#), 21 November 2022.

5 The House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs acknowledges that this report was written, and that most of this study was conducted, on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people. During this study, witnesses participated virtually from the traditional territories of the Sk̄wx̄wú7mesh, Tseil-Waututh, Musqueam, Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik, northern Tutchone and Huron-Wendat peoples. Some witnesses also participated from Inuit Nunangat (namely, from Nunavut and Nunavik) and Treaty 4 territory (which is on the homeland of the nêhiyawak, Anihšīnāpēk, Dakota, Lakota and Nakoda people, and the Métis Nation).

up to five languages simultaneously (out of the territory's 11 official languages)⁶, the committee would like to call on the House of Commons to look into this situation and find ways to accommodate simultaneous interpretation in more than three languages during committee meetings, when requested. As such, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 1

That the Government of Canada refer to the Board of Internal Economy a request to find ways to accommodate simultaneous interpretation in more than three languages during committee meetings when requested by either members or witnesses speaking an Indigenous language.

BACKGROUND

The exact number of Indigenous languages spoken in Canada is unclear but, in 2016, Statistics Canada had reported that more than 70 Indigenous languages were spoken at home. The *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported over 90 Indigenous languages for Canada. According to UNESCO, however, three quarters of these languages are considered endangered, and none can be considered safe; domestic research and reports written over the past 20 years support UNESCO's findings.⁷

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) called on the federal government to take a series of actions to address the harms done by residential schools.⁸ Notably, the TRC had called upon the federal government to enact legislation pertaining to Indigenous languages that incorporates the following principles:

- Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.
- Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties.
- The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation.

6 On normal sitting days, the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories offers simultaneous interpretation in five languages, but it is able to interpret all 11 official languages.

7 Government of Canada, *Let's celebrate Indigenous languages in Canada*; Government of Canada, *Discussion Guide: Consultation and Engagement on the Implementation of the Indigenous Languages Act*.

8 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Calls to Action*, 2015.



- The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.
- Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.⁹

In February 2019, the Honourable Pablo Rodriguez, Minister of Canadian Heritage, introduced the ILA to help “reclaim, revitalize, strengthen and maintain” Indigenous languages in Canada.¹⁰ The preamble to the Act acknowledges that Indigenous languages are facing “critical loss” and that there is an “urgent need” to maintain, revitalize and promote them.¹¹ The recognition, protection and revitalization of Indigenous languages is also an important component of reconciliation.

Current State of Indigenous Languages in Canada

During this study, the committee heard that all Indigenous languages in Canada are threatened to some extent,¹² with some “on the brink of extinction.”¹³ In its brief, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) wrote that “[o]nly Cree, Anishinabemowin and Inuktitut are predicted to survive if we maintain the current trajectory.”¹⁴ According to Miranda Huron, Director of Indigenous Education and Affairs at Capilano University, “[Indigenous] languages—the longest, most enduring repository of knowledge of the history of this land—are in a palpable state of fragility.”¹⁵

Importantly, Danielle Alphonse, BC Regional Innovation Chair for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development at Vancouver Island University, noted that Indigenous languages and dialects are in different stages of endangerment and may thus require different

9 Ibid.

10 Government of Canada, [Government of Canada introduces historic legislation on Indigenous languages](#).

11 [Indigenous Languages Act](#), S.C. 2019, c. 23, Preamble.

12 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Kitty Gordon, Coordinator, Office of the President, Makivik Corporation); INAN, [Evidence](#), 6 February 2023 (Hon. Pablo Rodriguez, Minister of Canadian Heritage).

13 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay, Wolastoqey Language Developer and Teacher, Wolastoqey Grand Council).

14 Assembly of First Nations, [Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs \(INAN\) re: Indigenous Languages Study](#), Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 3 February 2023.

15 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron, Director, Indigenous Education and Affairs, Capilano University, As an individual).

approaches to reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening.

Ronald E. Ignace, Canada's first Commissioner of Indigenous Languages, explained that this decline did not happen by accident: "there are historical, systemic racist policies and laws that have led to the delegitimizing, stigmatizing and shaming of [Indigenous] languages."¹⁶ Similarly, Ed Schultz, Governance Director at the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, stated:

[O]ver the course of the last 100 years, there have been mostly deliberate colonial practices and policies that were designed to weed out our language and weed out our practices. In many cases, it's on the law books that some things were outlawed, whether it was dancing or singing or in some cases speaking the language. We're trying to reverse a trend that's well over 100 years old. The colonial system spent billions of dollars to get the language out of our people, and we are saying, in the spirit of reconciliation today, that as much of an effort should be brought forward to help us reintroduce it or sustain it while it's still alive.¹⁷

This loss of language is also increasing as the population ages. In Nunavut, Alexina Kublu, an Inuktitut language instructor, noted that young people are less fluent in Inuktitut and that "their knowledge of the language is not as in-depth as it was when we had students 30 years ago."¹⁸ Likewise, in Nova Scotia, Blaire Gould, Executive Director of Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, indicated that fluency in Mi'kmaq was higher among older generations.¹⁹ Ron Tremblay, Wolastoqey Language Developer and Teacher with the Wolastoqey Grand Council, stated that, at 62, he was now "probably one of the youngest fluent speakers of our Wolastoqey language."²⁰

The committee was told that Elders act as spiritual leaders and knowledge keepers²¹ and that "[t]raditional knowledge is passed down from generation to generation, primarily through oral history learned from one generation to the next."²² This intergenerational transfer of knowledge, however, was deeply disrupted over several decades by various government policies that sought to erase Indigenous languages and cultures.

16 INAN, [Evidence](#), 6 February 2023 (Ronald E. Ignace, Commissioner, Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages).

17 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Ed Schultz, Governance Director, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation).

18 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu, Inuktitut Language Instructor, As an individual).

19 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Blaire Gould, Executive Director, Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey).

20 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

21 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Kevin Lewis, Assistant Professor, University of Saskatchewan, Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps, As an individual).

22 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Kitty Gordon).



Chief Leroy Denny of the Eskasoni Band Council explained that “[e]very time an [E]lder passes away, they take the whole knowledge like a library with them, so time is of the essence here.”²³ Mr. Tremblay made similar observations: “As the months and years go by, we are going to lose more and more of our fluent speakers and the knowledge-keepers of our language.”²⁴

Elders remain crucially important as knowledge keepers, leaders and teachers. But Ms. Alphonse warned that “[w]e have to be careful about how much we're utilizing each of those [E]lders within those language groups. We can overuse [E]lders as well, and we have to be very careful and protective of those people.”²⁵

The Importance of Language and Culture

Language is more than just a means of communication; it is central to one’s sense of identity and belonging.²⁶ As noted by Ms. Alphonse, “language encompasses everything.”²⁷ Mr. Tremblay also explained “how important language is to all [I]ndigenous peoples and how it connects us deeply to who we are and our relationship to the land, waters and all the fauna and flora.”²⁸ Lorna Williams, Chair of the First Peoples’ Cultural Foundation, explained that language is more than just words, “it's also learning the world view and the cultural ways of the people. It's a relationship with the land. It's a relationship with the ancestors. It's a relationship with the people who are coming. It's a relationship with all areas of the community.”²⁹

Several witnesses mentioned the importance of reconnecting to their culture through re-learning their language—the language of their parents or grandparents—that was lost as a result of the residential schools.³⁰ Elder Ida Bear, a Cree and Ojibwe teacher and residential school survivor, described her personal experience and the re-traumatizing

23 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Leroy Denny, Eskasoni First Nation).

24 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

25 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Danielle Alphonse, BC Regional Innovation Chair for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development, Vancouver Island University, As an individual).

26 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Kitty Gordon); INAN, [Evidence](#), 6 February 2023 (Hon. Pablo Rodriguez).

27 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Danielle Alphonse).

28 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

29 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams, Chair, First Peoples’ Cultural Foundation).

30 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Claudette Commanda, Chief Executive Officer, First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres).

effects of having to re-learn the language her parents spoke. Nevertheless, Ms. Bear considered that the overall effect of re-learning a lost language can be healing.³¹

Language use within education is just one aspect of language reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening. The committee heard that “[l]anguage is not something that belongs only in the schools, and it does not belong only out on the land. It belongs everywhere.”³² In her brief to the committee, Brenda Gauthier, Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, wrote that “Indigenous languages learning is most effective when combined with cultural practice... Culturally-connected, ceremonial-focused, and land-based language learning are successful models for Indigenous language education.”³³

One witness told the committee that “we need to be able to regenerate the language in every aspect of life in our community.”³⁴ Several witnesses emphasized the indivisibility of Indigenous languages, cultures, customs and land, and the importance of land-based teachings and education with respect to language revitalization.³⁵ Dr. Kevin Lewis, Assistant Professor at the University of Saskatchewan, said that “[t]he [E]lders [are saying] to take the kids out on the land. That's where the teachings are. This is where our kinship comes from and our relationships with the land and with the sun.”³⁶

For his part, Mr. Tremblay explained the following:

[I]f you want to learn a language, you have to go on the earth to get your hands dirty. You have to connect with our lands and our waters. Those are our teachers. Our language came from the land, not from a computer or from sitting in a classroom. We

31 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Ida Bear, Teacher of Indigenous languages (Cree and Ojibwe), As an individual).

32 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu).

33 Office of the Languages Commissioner for the Northwest Territories, [Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous Languages and Northern Affairs re: Indigenous Languages Study](#), Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 2 March 2023.

34 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams).

35 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice, Associate Professor and Gabriel Dumont Research Chair in Michif/Métis Education, University of Regina, As an individual); INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Danielle Alphonse); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Kevin Lewis); INAN, [Evidence](#), 6 February 2023 (Ronald E. Ignace).

36 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Kevin Lewis).



do need some technical support or technical curriculum to assist the teachers, or even the families at home, that way, but I think the real teachings come from the land.³⁷

Ms. Kublu had similar observations from Nunavut:

The traditional method of passing on knowledge among Inuit is—as I think it is among other peoples, as well—by doing. It's by watching and doing, not sitting down in a classroom and having someone talk and talk and talk at you. This happens during the summer, mainly, because it is quite cold in the winter up here. People go out on the land, away from the community, and they will focus on a skill, whether it's how to make a qamutiik or how to make a harpoon, or sewing and working with seal skin. It's to relive the Inuit culture using Inuktitut.³⁸

Additionally, the committee learned about the importance of reclaiming Indigenous languages for individual and community well-being and healing. Mr. Schultz highlighted a link between the lack of knowledge of Indigenous languages and negative social indicators among Indigenous people.³⁹ According to Dr. Melanie Brice, Associate Professor and Gabriel Dumont Research Chair in Michif/Métis Education at the University of Regina, “[t]here is already significant research that has been conducted on the connection between indigenous language learning and well-being within our communities.”⁴⁰ Conversely, Dr. Lewis explained that loss of culture and identity contributes to psychological distress and suicidal ideation.⁴¹

Others affirmed that reclaiming Indigenous languages offers a way to heal past and intergenerational trauma, and to develop a renewed sense of pride.⁴² Ms. Williams, Ms. Huron and the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation also testified about the need to assist “silent speakers,” people who learned Indigenous languages but, for reasons such as trauma, no longer speak them.⁴³

37 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

38 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu).

39 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Ed Schultz).

40 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice).

41 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Kevin Lewis).

42 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Ed Schultz); INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice); INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Claudette Commanda); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Ida Bear); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams); INAN, [Evidence](#), 6 February 2023 (Ronald E. Ignace).

43 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams); Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, 2023.

Moreover, the committee heard about the importance of songs and ceremonies:

A song is an important component in our life, and it's really easy. When I'm teaching an [I]ndigenous language and I find the person having trouble pronouncing a word, I tell them to sing the word and they'll overcome the difficulty of their pronunciation. A song is an important ingredient that lifts up one's spirit and develops a sense of pride in our children. I think that's what we have to rebuild, and sometimes it may take song to get us back into speaking our language.⁴⁴

As such, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 2

That the Government of Canada provide funding for the promotion of Indigenous languages within music and ceremonies to ensure that Indigenous songs are created and used as resources for future generations.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Since the adoption of the ILA in 2019, there have been some developments with respect to Indigenous languages in Canada, including the adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, the creation of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages and local initiatives implemented by Indigenous communities and organizations. These are discussed below.

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

During this study, several witnesses referred to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), which was adopted as a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly in 2007. According to Ms. Huron, “[the ILA] was Canada's first act that recognized [UNDRIP].”⁴⁵ Similarly, many witnesses referred to the adoption of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People Act*⁴⁶ (the UNDRIP

44 INAN, *Evidence*, 6 February 2023 (Ronald E. Ignace).

45 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron); the *Department for Women and Gender Equality Act*, S.C. 2018, c. 27, s. 661, which was adopted a year before the *Indigenous Languages Act*, referred to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in its preamble. The *Indigenous Languages Act*, however, appears to be the first federal statute with the stated purpose of contributing to the implementation of the Declaration. It is also the first piece of legislation to refer to the Declaration in its operative section.

46 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, S.C. 2021, c. 14.



Act) in 2021, as another important development for the protection of Indigenous languages in Canada.

In its brief, the AFN noted that “the full implementation of the [TRC’s Calls to Action], ILA and [UNDRIP] is required to ensure the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance, and strengthening of Indigenous languages and their recognition as a vital factor for Indigenous cultural continuity, identity, and self-determination.”⁴⁷

Moreover, according to Mr. Schultz, “[l]anguage, culture and identity are essential foundations for [Indigenous] self-government.”⁴⁸ Indigenous peoples have an inherent right to self-government; the federal government recognizes that right as being guaranteed in section 35 of the *Constitution Act, 1982*.⁴⁹ Article 3 of UNDRIP further recognizes that “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination”, meaning they can “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”

UNDRIP provides a universal framework for the recognition of rights of Indigenous peoples across the world, as well as minimum standards “for the survival, dignity, well-being and rights of the world’s [I]ndigenous peoples.”⁵⁰ The UNDRIP Act affirms that the “Declaration is a universal international human rights instrument with application in Canadian law.”

Section 5 of the UNDRIP Act requires the Minister of Justice to take all measures necessary to ensure that federal laws are consistent with the Declaration, and to set out a plan to achieve the Declaration’s objectives. Witnesses emphasized that the following UNDRIP articles are particularly relevant to the protection of Indigenous languages:

- article 1 (right to the fully enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms);
- article 5 (right to maintain and strengthen their distinct institutions);
- article 8 (right not to be subjected to forced assimilation and cultural destruction);

47 Assembly of First Nations, 2023.

48 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Ed Schultz).

49 Government of Canada, *Self-government*.

50 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, S.C. 2021, c. 14, Schedule.

- article 11 (right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs);
- article 12 (right to manifest, practise, develop and teach their spiritual and religious traditions, customs and ceremonies);
- article 13 (right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit histories and cultures);
- article 14 (right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions);
- article 15 (right to the dignity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations);
- article 16 (right to establish their own media in their own languages);
- article 31 (right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions); and
- article 36 (right to maintain and develop contacts, relations and cooperation across international borders).⁵¹

Implementation of the *Indigenous Languages Act*

The ILA was co-developed by the federal government, the AFN, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) and the Métis National Council (MNC). In its brief, the AFN wrote that the same “spirit of cooperation and understanding must continue to ensure the full and

51 Assembly of First Nations, 2023; David Leitch, *Why the Indigenous Languages Act of 2019 places Canada in violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and how Canada can remove this stain on its record of compliance with the Covenant*, Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 3 February 2023; Lorena Sekwan Fontaine, *Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs Indigenous Languages Study*, Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 3 February 2023; Andrea Bear Nicholas, *Brief to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs Regarding the Indigenous Languages Study*, Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 3 February 2023; Karihwakeron Tim Thompson, *Ensuring the Indigenous Languages Act Is Consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*, Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 30 January 2023; INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Karliin Aariak, Languages Commissioner, Office of the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut).



meaningful implementation of this historic piece of legislation.”⁵² The AFN indicated that they continue “to provide guidance on the implementation of the ILA.”⁵³

The committee also heard about progress made in terms of implementing the ILA. Minister Rodriguez highlighted the following developments:

- an increase in the number of government-funded Indigenous languages projects (from 180 projects in 2019 to over a thousand projects in 2022–2023) and an overall increase in federal funding for Indigenous languages;
- the signature of eight agreements with provincial and territorial governments (six agreements pursuant to sections 8 and 9 of the ILA and two languages accords with Nunavut and the Northwest Territories);
- the signature of a tripartite agreement with the Government of Nunavut and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. for a five-year initiative supporting a pilot project to increase the number of Inuktitut-speaking Inuit educators in the Nunavut education system; and
- the holding of 26 consultation sessions⁵⁴ across Canada on the role of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (OCIL) and on ways to best support Indigenous languages.

Appointment of the Commissioner for Indigenous Languages

The ILA provided for the creation of the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages (OCIL). The OCIL has a mandate to work with provinces, territories, Indigenous representative organizations, and Indigenous governments to create effective support for Indigenous languages in Canada through a variety of mechanisms. Pursuant to section 43(1) of the Act, the OCIL must submit an annual report to the Minister assessing:

- the use and vitality of Indigenous languages in Canada;

52 Assembly of First Nations, 2023.

53 Ibid.

54 The Department of Canadian Heritage provided [additional information](#) about the consultations, which were held in partnership with Indigenous people between September and December 2020. Approximately 500 people participated. A summary of each consultation session is available [online](#).

- the needs of Indigenous groups, communities and peoples and entities that are specialized in Indigenous languages;
- the progress made in revitalizing, reclaiming, maintaining and strengthening of Indigenous languages;
- the adequacy of funding provided by the Government of Canada for Indigenous languages; and
- the progress on the implementation of the Act.

Following consultations, the Commissioner and Directors of Indigenous Languages were appointed by the Governor-in-Council, based on the recommendation of the Minister of Canadian Heritage. According to the Department of Canadian Heritage,

a merit-based selection process was undertaken to identify highly qualified candidates. A modified Selection Committee was established, including First Nation, Inuit and Métis Nation representation, so that Indigenous perspectives could directly inform the selection of the Commissioner and Directors.⁵⁵

In June 2021, Ron Ignace, of the Secwepemc Nation, was appointed as the first Commissioner for Indigenous Languages.⁵⁶ Mr. Ignace, who is also the Office's Chief Executive Officer, appeared before the Committee on 6 February 2023.⁵⁷

The Board of the OCIL is formed by the Commissioner and the three Regional Directors, who were appointed at the same time, representing the interests of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. The Commissioner highlighted the importance of his office's mandate.⁵⁸ Mr. Ignace also explained to the committee that the COVID-19 pandemic has, to some extent, delayed the establishment of the OCIL and the Act's implementation. The focus of the OCIL's work has so far been on the establishment of the Commission, its governance structures, policy procedures and human resources systems.⁵⁹ Mr. Ignace added that:

55 Department of Canadian Heritage, [*Written response from the Department of Canadian Heritage related to the meeting of February 6, 2023.*](#)

56 Government of Canada, [*Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages.*](#)

57 INAN, [*Evidence*](#), 6 February 2023 (Ronald E. Ignace).

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.



There was no such entity or organization prior to the act, so we have been working to build the organization from the ground up... We're also working on long-term planning and strategies; we have begun baseline research to better understand the status of Indigenous languages in Canada and the funding in place to support language revitalization, strengthening and maintenance.⁶⁰

The Commissioner emphasized the need for independence for the OCIL: “We won’t allow interference in our work. Independence is critical, especially when moving towards dispute resolution processes. We cannot take sides.”⁶¹

Mr. Ignace also indicated that the OCIL has been doing presentations with Indigenous leaders, regional organizations and communities, and with public servants. The Commissioner expects the Office to be fully operational by the summer of 2023.⁶²

Local and Community Initiatives

The committee heard from witnesses about a range of local and community-led Indigenous language revitalization and preservation initiatives. Witnesses emphasized the important role of communities in fostering language development. Elder Claudette Commanda, Chief Executive Officer of the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres, was of the view that “[t]he implementation of the act and/or distribution of funding cannot be delegated to political organizations. Grassroots communities and grassroots organizations are the language-holders, the language speakers and the language champions.”⁶³ Mr. Schultz stated the following:

[W]e firmly believe that we need greater community delivery of programs and services. Centralized systems have been tried for decades and decades, and they do not work well. On the other hand, any community initiatives, although lowly funded, have turned out better results and more sustainable results.⁶⁴

Witnesses highlighted that language initiatives rely heavily on volunteers, many of whom are Elders. As one witness stated: “There is [...] a need for discussions on how to do this work without creating additional work for community members, who are

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Claudette Commanda).

64 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Ed Schultz).

overburdened in creating their own language programming. Language workers are often doing this work without significant support.”⁶⁵

Examples of successful programs and developments cited by witnesses included:

- the co-development of the *Mi’kmaw Languages Act* in 2021 in Nova Scotia, which passed unanimously, recognizing Mi’kmaw as the original language of the land (the development of a strategy and an action plan to revitalize the language is foreseen by the Act);⁶⁶
- a small-scale, land-based pre-kindergarten immersion program, launched in the fall of 2022 in Fredericton, New Brunswick;⁶⁷
- a first fiscal framework for Indigenous languages for self-governing Indigenous governments, which was developed with federal financial support, including a costing plan for 10 years;⁶⁸
- programs funded by the Government of the Northwest Territories, including: a successful mentor-apprentice program, which pairs language learners with speakers; support for local radio station broadcasting; and, direct funding to Indigenous communities.⁶⁹ In addition, the Northwest Territories government funds Indigenous language coordinators that support Indigenous language work in communities;⁷⁰
- a successful early learning-elementary immersion program at the Rossignol Elementary Community School in Sakitawak-Île-à-la-Crosse;⁷¹ and

65 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron).

66 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Blair Gould).

67 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

68 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Mark Nelson, Fiscal and Implementation Representative, Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation); Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, 2023.

69 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (R.J. Simpson, Member of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories, Hay River North, Government House Leader, Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, Minister of Justice).

70 Ibid.

71 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice).



- the creation of a Centre of Excellence and land-based education program led by Elders in Saskatchewan.⁷²

These local initiatives by Indigenous communities and organizations need to be supported. For instance, Dr. Megan Lukaniec, Linguist, Huron-Wendat Nation Council explained that “it is truly difficult to reawaken a dormant language and that it requires a lot of funding.”⁷³ For her part, Dr. Brice noted that it takes time and resources to apply for grants and that, at the community-level, there are not really any supports to assist in preparing grant applications:

Our communities do not have the same infrastructures that are set up at universities in the way that I’m supported as a scholar to submit grant applications. There are things that need to be in place that are supportive and help our communities to get over these obstacles around, as you say, the administrative side, in terms of the paperwork, especially in communities where their first language is not English or French, and that’s what the application requires. There are accommodations that need to be made.⁷⁴

Based on the testimony, and recognizing that Indigenous languages are intertwined with community-based transmission of traditional knowledge and culture and traditional practices, including land-based education, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 3

That the Government of Canada’s national strategies and action plans for Indigenous language reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening reflect different regional and local contexts by incorporating flexible and diverse funding and programming approaches.

Recommendation 4

That the Government of Canada do more to empower Indigenous-led processes and decision-making with respect to the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages.

72 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Kevin Lewis).

73 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec, Linguist, Huron-Wendat Nation Council).

74 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice).

Recommendation 5

That the Government of Canada develop programs to address the Indigenous language research needs of Indigenous communities, specifically those whose language is “dormant” or at risk of being lost.

Recommendation 6

That the Government of Canada remove any administrative obstacles hindering Indigenous communities and organizations from applying for language funding; and that the government ensure that the application process is accessible to all communities, regardless of their available administrative or human resources.

THE INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ACT

During this study, the committee heard that the ILA was a positive and welcomed step in the right direction. However, witnesses also explained that certain issues with the ILA need to be addressed to meaningfully support the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages across the country.

Positive Aspects and Opportunities

Some witnesses spoke favourably about the Act.⁷⁵ For instance, Ms. Huron argued that:

The Indigenous Languages Act was an incredible first step in the recognition of [I]ndigenous language rights. It ... assured adequate, predictable and sustainable funding for language resurgence. The establishment of the [I]ndigenous languages commission was also an important move in ensuring that language issues will continue to be heard here in Ottawa.⁷⁶

Elder Commanda stated the following:

We see the Indigenous Languages Act as a validation of our languages. It validates the importance of our languages and the richness of our languages for cultural identity and healing. In building self-esteem for [F]irst [N]ations children and youth, the validation of our languages for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge is so critical and so

75 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Blaire Gould); INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Claudette Commanda); INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Ida Bear).

76 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron).



important, because our languages are who we are: our identity, our culture and our life, and that connection to land, to spirit, to the creator and to all of our teachings.

The Indigenous Languages Act is also viewed as the Government of Canada's acknowledgement of the historical wrongs that have contributed to language loss. It is also viewed as an instrument to hold the government accountable in its obligation to support the restoration, revitalization and retention of [F]irst [N]ation languages with an ongoing commitment for funding needed for immediate and long-term language planning, resource development and language learning.⁷⁷

Ms. Williams also noted that the Act showed that “Canada was acknowledging and recognizing that our languages exist, and [is] putting into place a process of our being able to work together to do something, finally, in a legitimate way for our languages.”⁷⁸

Concerns and Proposed Amendments

Several witnesses expressed concerns about the way the ILA is currently written and being implemented. Dr. Lukaniec noted that

[T]he act doesn't speak directly to the heart of what the purpose is. [Section 5 says] it's to “establish measures to facilitate the provision of [adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages].” Never is there a specific point where it says that the federal government “is committed to providing adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for... Indigenous languages”. That appears in the preamble, but it does not appear in the purpose of the act.⁷⁹

Ms. Huron formulated the problem as follows:

After three years, we need to question what the aim of this policy is. Are we looking at sustaining Indigenous languages as secondary languages, with the unfortunate potential outcome that students taking language classes in school remember only a few sentences in adulthood, or are we looking at language resurgence, such that we invest in developing sustainable language economies, much like what has been created for minority official languages?⁸⁰

77 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Claudette Commanda).

78 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams).

79 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec); ILA, s. 5(d). The purposes of the Act are set out in section 5.

80 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron).

During this study, witnesses proposed concrete ways to strengthen the ILA, such as:

- clarifying the purpose and goals of the Act;⁸¹
- reflecting the importance of healing through the revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultures;⁸²
- replacing verbs such as “may” and “should” with “must” or “shall” to make certain aspects mandatory as opposed to discretionary;⁸³
- making an explicit, statutory commitment for the provision of long-term funding; and⁸⁴
- defining “language rights”⁸⁵ and undefined terms used in the Act, such as “support,” “access to services,” “sufficient demand” and “capacity.”⁸⁶

The Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories also recommended broadening the mandate of the OCIL so that it can “hear complaints and provide support in *all* cases related to Indigenous languages, regardless of the funding source.”⁸⁷ Under section 27(1) of the ILA,⁸⁸ the OCIL may review complaints related to funding provided by the Government of Canada. In her brief, the Commissioner explained that the territorial government has been providing funding for Indigenous language training since 2018; that funding now being blended with federal contributions create confusion around the mandate of the OCIL as defined in section 27(1) of the ILA.

81 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec); First Peoples' Cultural Council, [Brief to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs \(INAN\) 44th Parliament, 1st Session: Indigenous Languages Study](#), Brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 1 February 2023.

82 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Ida Bear); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams).

83 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu); INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

84 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec); INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu); INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

85 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec); Karihwakeron Tim Thompson, 2023.

86 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (R.J. Simpson).

87 Office of the Languages Commissioner for the Northwest Territories, 2023.

88 Section 27(1) states that “[t]he Commissioner [of Indigenous Languages] may conduct a review of a complaint, filed by an Indigenous government or other Indigenous governing body, an Indigenous organization or an Indigenous person, respecting any matter referred to in any of paragraphs 26(a) to (d).” Paragraphs 26(a) to (d) only refer to federal funding, obligations, policies and programs.



Based on the testimony, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 7

That the Government of Canada, in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis, prepare and introduce in Parliament amendments to the *Indigenous Languages Act* to: clearly state in section 5 that protecting all Indigenous languages in Canada is one of the purposes of the Act; consider the creation of more mandatory obligations for Canada under the Act; and amend sections 26(a)–26(d) and 27(1) to enable the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages to consider complaints related to programming involving blended or joint funding.

Recommendation 8

That the Government of Canada consider the importance of healing through the revitalization of Indigenous languages and cultures in the design of Indigenous languages programming.

In terms of the implementation of the ILA, the AFN recommended developing “a holistic, whole-of-government approach for the full implementation of the ILA with respect to the exercise of Indigenous language rights in education, health, and the justice system, among others.”⁸⁹ In its brief, the First Peoples Cultural Council recommended developing a national strategy for the implementation of the Act.⁹⁰

The committee also heard from many witnesses that the ILA does not adequately reflect the relevant provisions of UNDRIP relating to language rights. Although witnesses referred to several UNDRIP articles, articles 13, 14, 15 and 16 were common to all who mentioned UNDRIP. These four articles recognize that Indigenous peoples have the right:

- to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their languages (article 13);
- to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages (article 14);
- to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations (article 15); and

89 Assembly of First Nations, 2023.

90 First Peoples’ Cultural Council, 2023.

- to establish their own media in their own languages (article 16).

Several briefs received by the committee suggested amending and strengthening the Act to include the implementation of UNDRIP's articles 13⁹¹ and 14⁹² and others related to Indigenous languages within the operative clauses of the Act, to ensure that language rights are defined and enforceable.⁹³

Other recommendations related to UNDRIP include:

- adding specific language rights that are recognized in UNDRIP, such as the right to be educated in an Indigenous language⁹⁴—the implementation of such rights would require a whole-of-government approach;⁹⁵ and
- adding a right to Indigenous language education in section 6 and, in section 8, a positive duty on the federal government to cooperate with other governments and entities to support Indigenous languages.⁹⁶

According to one brief,

[t]he revitalization of Indigenous languages in Canada depends, as it always has on intergenerational transmission. In the modern context, this requires state supported educational systems that both teach Indigenous children their own ancestral languages

91 Article 13 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* reads as follows: (1) Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons. (2) States shall take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and be understood in political, legal and administrative proceedings, where necessary through the provision of interpretation or by other appropriate means.

92 Article 14 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* reads as follows (1) Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. (2) Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination. (3) States shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

93 Assembly of First Nations, 2023; David Leitch, 2023; Lorena Sekwan Fontaine, 2023; Andrea Bear Nicholas, 2023; Karihwakeron Tim Thompson, 2023.

94 Karihwakeron Tim Thompson, 2023.

95 Ibid.

96 Lorena Sekwan Fontaine, 2023.



and that teach other subjects in those languages. And significantly for Canada, article 14 of UNDRIP recognizes such systems must exist both on and off reserve.⁹⁷

Based on the testimony, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 9

That the Government of Canada adopt a holistic, whole-of-government approach to the implementation of the *Indigenous Languages Act*, recognizing that Indigenous language rights are linked to Indigenous rights to education, health and justice, among others.

OTHER CHALLENGES AND ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

During this study, witnesses looked beyond the ILA and provided additional recommendations to support the revitalization of Indigenous languages, such as addressing the inadequate funding currently provided for such activities, appropriately compensating teachers of Indigenous languages, conferring an official status to these languages, and funding Indigenous language immersion programs.

Inadequate Funding

One of the recurring issues raised by witnesses was inadequate funding for language reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening.⁹⁸ Most witnesses considered that funding for the protection of Indigenous languages to date has been insufficient⁹⁹ and mostly short-term and proposal-based¹⁰⁰, while one witness testified about receiving a rejection to a funding request for a project.¹⁰¹ According to Mr. Denny, “If this government is serious about the objectives set out in the *Indigenous Languages Act*, the funding must back the objectives.”¹⁰²

97 David Leitch, 2023.

98 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Blaire Gould); INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay); INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Kitty Gordon); INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Mark Nelson); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec); First Nations with School Collective, 2023.

99 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Blaire Gould).

100 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec).

101 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Gerry Guillet, Director of Education, Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority).

102 INAN, [Evidence](#), 12 December 2022 (Leroy Denny).

A study undertaken in 2021–2022 by the AFN concluded that approximately \$2 billion was required for support to First Nations languages each year, over the next ten years.¹⁰³ According to a brief submitted by the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nations, self-governing Indigenous governments would need almost \$1 billion over the next decade to support language revitalization efforts.¹⁰⁴

Dr. Lukaniec recommended increasing funding for Indigenous languages “to at least match what is provided to official languages.”¹⁰⁵ She explained that it is difficult to reawaken a dormant language and that it requires long-term funding over decades. In her view, long-term planning is not possible under the current funding model.¹⁰⁶

Overall, witnesses recommended that funding for Indigenous languages must be increased, predictable, long-term and indexed, with one witness recommending starting with those languages that are most at risk.¹⁰⁷ Minister Rodriguez confirmed to the committee that “Indigenous partners have consistently told [the federal government] that funding for [I]ndigenous languages must be long term, stable and predictable, and we agree. They've said that the processes for receiving funding must be [I]ndigenous-led, accessible, responsive, timely and transparent.”¹⁰⁸

The minister explained that the federal government increased funding since 2016–2017 and has been adopting a flexible and distinctions-based approach which “will allow for long-term funding agreements with [I]ndigenous governments, organizations and communities.” In a written submission, the Department of Canadian Heritage provided further details on funding, indicating that transfer payments almost quadrupled since the adoption of the Act in 2019.¹⁰⁹ In its brief, the First Peoples’ Cultural Council explained the situation surrounding funding:

The Act aims to: “establish measures to facilitate the provision of adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages” (§5d). With Budgets 2019 and 2021, the amount

103 Assembly of First Nations, 2023; First Nations’ Cultural Council, 2023.

104 Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, 2023.

105 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec); In April 2023, the Government of Canada presented the [Action Plan for Official Languages 2023–2028](#). Over these five years, the government is committed over \$4.1 billion to support official languages.

106 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec).

107 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Danielle Alphonse).

108 INAN, *Evidence*, 6 February 2023 (Hon. Pablo Rodriguez).

109 Canadian Heritage, [Written response from the Department of Canadian Heritage related to the meeting of February 6, 2023](#).



of funding has substantially increased. In addition, multi-year funding was available for two fiscal years and will be available with the new funding model to be implemented in the near future. These are both very positive impacts of the Act's implementation and have made a big difference to communities in B.C. who applied for funding.

However:

- The levels of investment will need to increase as communities are able to incrementally implement more language initiatives over time. Currently, \$115M annually (for all of Canada) is projected ongoing from 2024–25 onwards; this is not enough...
- Stable funding is essential. When communities don't have certainty beyond one year, they cannot create long-term language plans or hire and retain permanent staff in language positions. Funding uncertainty also means that there is significant staff turnover in this sector and language work starts and stops and loses momentum with funding gaps.¹¹⁰

Based on the testimony, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 10

That the Government of Canada take immediate action to ensure the provision of adequate, sustainable, long-term, and distinctions-based funding to support the Indigenous-led reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages in Canada; and that the Government of Canada report back to the committee within one year on efforts made to achieve this goal.

Compensation for Indigenous Languages Teachers

With respect to Indigenous language teachers, the committee heard about the need for fair compensation and the importance of training new teachers.¹¹¹ Several witnesses pointed out the fact that current Indigenous language revitalization efforts rely heavily on a rapidly dwindling group of speakers, mostly Elders, who are often volunteering or not properly compensated for their time.¹¹²

The Committee learned, however, that many Elders depend on supplementary income support such as Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement, and that payments of honoraria for their language work may be considered "income," which may

110 First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2023.

111 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Ida Bear); INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams).

112 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams); Karihwakeron Tim Thompson, 2023.

affect such support.¹¹³ Ms. Brice made the following recommendation: “I recommend that the remuneration received by retired fluent [I]ndigenous language speakers not be considered income when it is used for indigenous language revitalization activities.” Additionally, the committee heard that many Elders and Indigenous language teachers are not formally recognized as “teachers.”¹¹⁴

Based on the testimony, the Committee recommends:

Recommendation 11

That the Government of Canada work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations to ensure that Indigenous languages teachers are compensated in the same way as teachers in the public education system; and that additional funding be provided to train Indigenous languages teachers.

Recommendation 12

That the Government of Canada explore how to ensure that compensation received by Indigenous Elders for language teaching work does not lead to clawbacks of, or reduction in, Old Age Security payments and the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Official Recognition of Indigenous Languages

While the ILA does not confer an official status to Indigenous languages in Canada, its preamble states that “the recognition and implementation of rights related to Indigenous languages are at the core of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and are fundamental to shaping the country.” During this study, some witnesses said that Indigenous languages should be recognized as official, original or national languages.¹¹⁵

Ms. Kublu explained that, in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, the “official languages acts recognize the language of the first people of the region.”¹¹⁶ One witness also referred to Nova Scotia’s recent *Mi’kmaw Language Act*, which recognized Mi’kmaw as the “original language” of the province.¹¹⁷

113 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice).

114 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Lorna Williams).

115 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu); INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

116 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Alexina Kublu).

117 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Blair Gould).



In this regard, some witnesses observed that funding for Indigenous languages was not on par with that provided for English and French.¹¹⁸ One witness argued that this funding difference may place Canada in violation of its obligations under international law as Indigenous people are being discriminated against on the ground of language.¹¹⁹ In her brief, the Languages Commissioner of the Northwest Territories wrote that “[b]y increasing Indigenous languages funding, such that it is on par with French and English funding, Indigenous governments across Canada can create the culturally appropriate programs necessary to ensure successful Indigenous languages revitalization and survival.”¹²⁰

Recommendation 13

That the Government of Canada work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners and relevant stakeholders, such as provincial and territorial governments, to determine the best approach to reconcile Canada’s official bilingualism with the recognition that Indigenous languages are the first languages of this land.

Moreover, the committee heard that federal public servants receive a bilingual bonus, if their position requires them to be fluent in English and French. The same is not true for those public servants who speak an Indigenous language alongside English or French. According to Ms. Huron, extending the bilingual bonus to people whose second language is an Indigenous language would be “an easy first step for government to take.”¹²¹ Ms. Ariak explained that this serves as an incentive for people to “give service in and learn more of their language.”¹²² Based on the testimony, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 14

That the Government of Canada incentivize Indigenous languages within the public service through bonuses, promotions, nominations and other means.

118 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec).

119 David Leitch, 2023.

120 Office of the Languages Commissioner for the Northwest Territories, 2023.

121 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Miranda Huron).

122 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Karliin Ariak).

Immersion and Mentorship Programs

Many witnesses stressed the need for immersion programs in Indigenous languages, but some pointed out that these immersion programs needed to stand alongside other initiatives. On the other hand, the First Peoples' Cultural Council wrote that "immersion schools alone aren't going to revitalize languages" as "a community-wide effort is needed." The organization further noted that "[m]any barriers exist to the implementation of immersion in schools," such as the colonial nature of the education system, pay inequities and a lack of teachers.¹²³

According to Dr. Brice,

Language immersion programs are more effective than one-off language learning activities, so more needs to be done to support the immersion programs in schools, in homes and in communities. Indigenous languages need to be found in more places. We cannot rely just on schools. Communities need to be supported to create immersion programs like the mentor-apprentice program, as well as provided with resources to create videos, games, audio and television programming in the target language.¹²⁴

Witnesses who spoke about immersion emphasized the need for more funding.¹²⁵

Mr. Guillet explained, for instance, that the Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority lacks the resources required to launch an immersion program in Dene.¹²⁶ Mr. Tremblay indicated that the Wolastoqey Grand Council launched an immersion program in September 2022, "but [they] lack funding from both the provincial and federal governments. We have put in various proposals [for funding], but very few are approved."¹²⁷

Mr. Nelson advocated for full-time, intensive and paid immersion programs for adults, noting that "[t]his has been proven to work on the ground and to create very high-level intermediate to semi-fluent speakers in a couple of years, but it needs intensive effort and resources to do it."¹²⁸ Dr. Lukaniec also recommended providing funding for paid,

123 First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2023.

124 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice); In its *brief*, the Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation explained that mentor-apprentice programs are a form of "[o]ne-on-one active immersion, using everyday activities and cultural practices as the vehicle for learning." It is "[o]ne of the most commonly used and flexible approaches to language transmission."

125 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay); INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Gerry Guillet).

126 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Gerry Guillet).

127 INAN, *Evidence*, 12 December 2022 (Ron Tremblay).

128 INAN, *Evidence*, 30 January 2023 (Mark Nelson).



full-time immersion programs for adults, indicating that some Mohawk communities already had such programs in Kanien'kéha.¹²⁹ Similarly, Dr. Brice was in favour of enabling adult learners “to take time away from work to spend those hours participating in language transmission activities with fluent speakers.”¹³⁰ Such activities would not be limited to immersion programs, but could extend to mentorship initiatives.

Recommendation 15

That the Government of Canada work with First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners to identify barriers to Indigenous language immersion and ways to overcome them.

Coordination between Jurisdictions

While Parliament has jurisdiction for matters related to Indigenous peoples, such matters often overlap with areas falling under provincial or territorial responsibility. Some witnesses expressed concerns arising from the constitutional division of powers and recommended improving coordination between the federal, provincial and territorial governments’ work towards the protection of Indigenous languages.

Ms. Aariak argued that the federal government, specifically, has not been meeting its obligations set out in the territory’s *Inuit Language Protection Act (ILPA)*, which notably mandates the use of Inuktitut and/or Inuinnaqtun on public signage and displays:

The issues that my office faces in addressing concerns involving the federal agencies, departments and institutions in Nunavut include a lack of response from the obligated federal agencies, departments and institutions, and/or the absence of tools to enforce their compliance with the law, even if the complaints are admissible.

This is especially concerning because federal agencies, departments and institutions in Nunavut are accountable for the lack of Inuktitut in their oral communications, public signs, posters and reception and client services, as required under ILPA.¹³¹

To address this situation, Ms. Aariak recommended the establishment of a memorandum of understanding with federal agencies, departments and institutions in Nunavut “to improve communication on language issues and resolve them while concerns are raised about a federal institution in Nunavut.” She also recommended

129 INAN, [Evidence](#), 1 February 2023 (Megan Lukaniec).

130 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Melanie Brice).

131 INAN, [Evidence](#), 30 January 2023 (Karliin Aariak).

developing a “legislative tool” to hold federal organizations accountable for the implementation of recommendations made with respect to language issues.¹³²

From the Northwest Territories, Minister Simpson had similar comments:

The federal Indigenous Languages Act provides room for a variety of [I]ndigenous language revitalization and protection efforts, and, from a legislative perspective, aligns well with the NWT's Official Languages Act. However, the GNWT would like to see improved coordination of funding for language revitalization and service delivery initiatives to improve efficiency and better support strategic objectives in our territory.¹³³

Based on the testimony, the committee recommends:

Recommendation 16

That the Government of Canada work with provinces and territories, and First Nations, Inuit and Métis partners, to better coordinate the work being done to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages across the country.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous languages are an invaluable resource. The loss of a language can have serious negative consequences on a people and its culture, its collective well-being and its sense of identity and belonging. The committee is concerned about current trends relating to language loss and retention, as several First Nations, Inuit and Métis languages risk becoming extinct across Canada. This situation is fundamentally linked to the assimilationist and genocidal policies adopted by Canada for much of its history. As such, the Government of Canada bears responsibility in helping Indigenous peoples reclaim, maintain, revitalize and strengthen their languages.

That many Indigenous languages are still spoken today is a testament to the strength of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. However, that does not mean that Canadian society should be complacent. The opportunity to support these languages must be seized today to avoid further loss and damage. The ILA is a step in the right direction but, as highlighted by witnesses, more needs to be done. The Act must be strengthened, funding must be improved, and First Nations, Inuit and Métis must be supported in their

132 Ibid.

133 INAN, *Evidence*, 1 February 2023 (R.J. Simpson).



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implementation of self-determined solutions. Given the urgency of the situation, the committee strongly urges the Government of Canada to act swiftly.

APPENDIX A LIST OF WITNESSES

The following table lists the witnesses who appeared before the committee at its meetings related to this report. Transcripts of all public meetings related to this report are available on the committee’s [webpage for this study](#).

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
As an individual Alexina Kublu, Inuktituk Language Instructor	2022/12/12	46
Athabasca Denesuline Education Authority Gerry Guillet, Director of Education	2022/12/12	46
Eskasoni Band Council Leroy Daniel Denny, Eskasoni First Nation	2022/12/12	46
Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey Blaire Gould, Executive Director	2022/12/12	46
Wolastoqey Grand Council Ron Tremblay, Wolastoqey Language Developer and Teacher	2022/12/12	46
As an individual Danielle Alphonse, BC Regional Innovation Chair for Aboriginal Early Childhood Development, Vancouver Island University Melanie Griffith Brice, Associate Professor and Gabriel Dumont Research Chair in Michif/Métis Education, University of Regina Miranda Huron, Director, Indigenous Education and Affairs, Capilano University	2023/01/23	47
Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation Ed Schultz, Governance Director Mark Nelson, Fiscal and Implementation Representative	2023/01/23	47
Makivik Corporation Kitty Gordon, Coordinator, Office of the President	2023/01/23	47

Organizations and Individuals	Date	Meeting
Office of the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut Karliin Aariak, Languages Commissioner	2023/01/23	47
As an individual Ida Jean Bear, Teacher of Indigenous languages (Cree and Ojibwe) Kevin Lewis, Assistant Professor, University of Saskatchewan, Kâniyâsihk Culture Camps	2023/02/01	48
First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres Claudette Commanda, Chief Executive Officer	2023/02/01	48
First Peoples' Cultural Foundation Lorna Wanosts'a7 Williams, Chair	2023/02/01	48
Huron-Wendat Nation Council Megan Lukaniec, Linguist	2023/02/01	48
Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories R.J. Simpson, Member of the Legislative Assembly, Hay River North, Government House Leader, Minister of Education, Culture and Employment, Minister of Justice	2023/02/01	48
Department of Canadian Heritage Paul Pelletier, Director General, Indigenous Languages Hon. Pablo Rodriguez, P.C., M.P., Minister of Canadian Heritage	2023/02/06	49
Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages Ronald E. Ignace, Commissioner	2023/02/06	49

APPENDIX B LIST OF BRIEFS

The following is an alphabetical list of organizations and individuals who submitted briefs to the committee related to this report. For more information, please consult the committee's [webpage for this study](#).

Assembly of First Nations

Bear Nicholas, Andrea

First Nations with Schools Collective

First Peoples' Cultural Council

Fontaine, Lorena

Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation

Leitch, David

Office of the Languages Commissioner for the Northwest Territories

Thompson, Karihwakeron Tim

REQUEST FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the committee requests that the government table a comprehensive response to this report.

A copy of the relevant *Minutes of Proceedings* ([Meetings Nos. 46, 47, 48, 49, 59, 68 and 69](#)) is tabled.

Respectfully submitted,

Jenica Atwin
Chair

BLOC QUÉBÉCOIS DISSENTING REPORT

Knowledge (for) Action

The Bloc Québécois would like to thank the Committee members and the House of Commons staff for their dedication and hard work during this study. We would also like to thank all the witnesses who contributed to the Committee's work through their observations and briefs.

On reading the report *Reclaiming, Revitalizing, Maintaining and Strengthening Indigenous Languages in Canada*, it becomes clear that although the federal government has the tools it needs to take meaningful action to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen Indigenous languages, such as the *Indigenous Languages Act* (ILA), it is failing to reverse the decline of these languages. In light of the testimonies heard and the recommendations made in the report, there does not appear to have been any tangible improvement in the state of Indigenous languages, as can be seen by the fact that each of the witnesses' requests or the committee members' recommendations are actually already guaranteed to some extent by the ILA.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE REPORT *RECLAIMING, REVITALIZING, MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN CANADA* (2023) AND THE *INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES ACT* (2019)

Recommendation 1	-
Recommendation 2	-
Recommendation 3	5 f) TRC Call to Action 14
Recommendation 4	5 e.1)
Recommendation 5	-
Recommendation 6	-
Recommendation 7	5 a)
Recommendation 8	-
Recommendation 9 (cf. 16)	5 e)

Recommendation 10	Preamble, p. 2; 5 f) TRC Call to Action 14 iii ; 5 f) TRC Call to Action 15; 7; 43 (1); 43 (1) c)
Recommendation 11	-
Recommendation 12	-
Recommendation 13	<i>Indigenous Languages Act</i>
Recommendation 14	-
Recommendation 15	5 b) (ii); 23 (1) b); 24 (1) b
Recommendation 16 (cf. 9)	5 e)

The study on Indigenous languages ended up not so much proposing new courses of action different from those set out in the ILA, but rather confirming that, in light of the evidence received during the meetings of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, nearly four years after the adoption of this Act on 21 June 2019, the vitality of Indigenous languages remains as threatened as ever, and that without immediate and full effective and concerted measures with Indigenous nations, Indigenous languages, with some exceptions, run the risk of becoming extinct over the next few decades.¹

Certainly, some of the recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs – recommendations 1-2, 5-6, 8, 11-12 and 14 – cross the boundary between trusting that the ILA implicitly includes it and ensuring that it is spelled out in the ILA, i.e., they require that the letter of the Act respects its spirit. In addition to this study, these recommendations could themselves give rise to a study by the appropriate committees, be assessed in the light of the federal government’s jurisdiction, or even be taken into account when the ILA is reviewed.

That said, despite section 43 of the ILA, no annual report from the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages has been prepared to date. This means that we do not currently have the independent information essential to take effective action on:

- (a) the use and vitality of Indigenous languages in Canada;
- (b) the needs of Indigenous groups, communities and peoples and entities that are specialized in Indigenous languages — and the progress made — in relation to the

¹Assembly of First Nations, *Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAN) - RE: Indigenous Languages Study*, Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, 3 February 2023.

- reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages;
- (c) the adequacy of funding provided by the Government of Canada for the purposes of initiatives related to Indigenous languages; and
 - (d) the implementation of this Act.²

In order to objectively measure the progress made in reclaiming, revitalizing, maintaining and strengthening Indigenous languages, a comprehensive status report on language use and vitality, as well as on the language needs of Indigenous peoples, must be conducted soon. Without this information, it is impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of government funding or the implementation of this Act. This means that as long as the Office of the Commissioner of Indigenous Languages is unable to fulfill its mandate, or as long as the government does not temporarily step in instead of taking a “wait and see” approach, we will be unable to confirm whether we are moving forward or backward, or whether we are doing what needs to be done.

And time is running out.

Recommendation 1

That the Minister of Heritage mandate an independent body to produce a report under section 43 on “the use and vitality of Indigenous languages in Canada” and “the needs of Indigenous groups, communities and peoples and entities that are specialized in Indigenous languages — and the progress made — in relation to the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages” and that this report be submitted to the Indigenous and Northern Affairs committee within six (6) months.

² *Indigenous Languages Act* (2019), pp. 17–18.

