

A presentation to the Senate of Canada
Standing Committee
on Aboriginal Peoples regarding
[BILL C-91]
An Act respecting Indigenous languages

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First Peoples' Cultural Council

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FIRST PEOPLES'
CULTURAL COUNCIL

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1. Acknowledgments and Introduction

We acknowledge the traditional territory of the Lekwungen speaking people here in Victoria, B.C. We thank the Senate of Canada Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples for the invitation to discuss this important Bill.

Weyktp, I am Tracey Herbert from St'uxwtews First Nation (Bonaparte First Nation) of the Secwepemc Nation in B.C. I have the privilege of being the CEO of First Peoples' Cultural Council. The First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) is a First Nations-led provincial Crown corporation with a mandate to support the revitalization of First Nations languages, arts, cultures and heritage in British Columbia. The organization provides funding, resources and training to communities and monitors the status of First Nations languages. We also undertake research on language revitalization and provide technical advice and policy recommendations for First Nations leadership and government.

Let me start by saying, for many years Indigenous peoples have had a strong desire for legislation to protect our languages. I am happy to be here today with you to discuss how we can work together to strengthen Bill C-91 so the Act can support the work we need to do as Canadians to revitalize the languages that come from this land we now call Canada. The introduction of Bill C-91 is a concrete step towards reconciliation by the Government of Canada. Today we want to advocate for **one key amendment** to the Bill as it is currently worded.¹ This amendment would strengthen the Act to make it more responsive to the needs of Indigenous communities and languages now and into the future.

2. Article 7: Adequate, sustainable and long-term funding

The commitment to provide adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages (Article 7) **is crucial**. In our presentation to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, we, along with other witnesses, recommended a number of amendments. Some recommendations from witnesses were incorporated by the Committee and others were not, but at this point in the process we need to emphasize: Article 7 is not

¹ We are referring to the wording of Bill C-91 following March 18 amendments by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage at the Second Reading stage.

adequate. This is the one point on which we want to focus. We understand the current amended wording of Article 7 to be as follows: “The Minister must consult with a variety of Indigenous governments and other Indigenous governing bodies and a variety of Indigenous organizations in order to meet the objective of providing adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages.”

Article 7 describes a non-specific consultation process to be undertaken by the Minister in order to meet the objective of providing funding. We foresee that the process as described will prevent effective and efficient distribution of funding. Bill C-91 only creates an **obligation** for the Minister of Canadian Heritage **to consult** on the subject of funding and does not create any obligation for any amount of funding to be provided.

We are requesting a change to ensure long-term financial support for our languages. Our Elders, knowledge keepers, speakers, language teachers, learners and those with expertise and commitment must have access to resources. Ultimately, the Act must guarantee investments that respond to the needs of Indigenous communities and be protected from shifting government interests.

We recommend the following amendment to Article 7: “The Minister must fund a **national Indigenous language strategy** in order to meet the objective of providing adequate, sustainable and long-term funding for the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of each Indigenous language in Canada.”

Our organization has conducted international research of Indigenous language policies in 10 countries in order to identify correlations between different aspects of Indigenous language legislation and government spending on Indigenous language revitalization (Bliss, 2019). Having a **defined action plan or language strategy** as part of legislation is a predictive factor that positively and negatively correlates with high and low levels of government spending respectively. A language strategy also provides the framework for robust measurement and evaluation of the effectiveness of actions undertaken to ensure that government investments are used wisely. Further, we recommend that a national Indigenous language organization could be created to work in collaboration with the Minister to develop the strategy and funding framework.

3. What does adequate, sustainable and long-term funding mean?

Do we have any idea what the commitment to provide adequate, sustainable and long-term funding means? The federal budget was released on March 19, 2019. It states: “To support the implementation of the proposed Indigenous Languages Act, Budget 2019 proposes to invest \$333.7 million over the next five years, starting in 2019–20, with

\$115.7 million per year ongoing” (Department of Finance Canada, 2019). I can unequivocally tell you that this is not adequate funding to do the work that is required.

British Columbia has more than 50% of Indigenous languages in Canada, with 34 languages across 203 communities. We have been supporting these communities in their language work since 1990 and have a very good idea of what revitalization costs for languages at different stages of vitality. We were directly involved in the co-development process for the Bill. I served on both the Technical Committee and the Costing Committee with the Assembly of First Nations. For the costing committee, our organization provided a detailed breakdown of the cost for three representative communities to reclaim, revitalize or maintain a language respectively. Using this information and additional research, researchers for the Assembly of First Nations developed costing estimates aggregated for the country as a whole. Over ten years, adequate funding is estimated to range from approximately \$200 million to \$900 million per year. This includes costs for K-12 language education as well as for all lifelong learning in the community. The investment varies depending on the number of language revitalization and language education strategies in each community. It does not include estimates for Inuit or Métis initiatives. The amount provided in Budget 2019 is not adequate.

We believe the most effective way to ensure adequate, sustainable and long-term funding is provided is to revise Article 7 to mandate funding of a national Indigenous language strategy as outlined above. The First Nations in British Columbia have the most at stake with the high number of languages and their current state of vitality. Only 4 per cent of our First Nations population in B.C. speaks their language fluently. We have a short time in which to create new speakers. However, we have seen B.C. communities achieve great progress with support and **there is hope** for each language if we all work together. Each language is a gift and comes from the land. Every Indigenous person deserves the opportunity to know their languages, history and laws.

4. Conclusion

We respectfully request that the Senate of Canada Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples consider this important amendment in their review of the Bill. We would be very pleased to provide any additional information as needed to assist the Committee’s work. Unfortunately, there are many international examples where the well-meaning words of legislation have not resulted in concrete progress for Indigenous languages and their speakers. We strongly believe that the inclusion of mandatory funding for a national Indigenous language strategy will ensure that the intent of Bill C-91 is fulfilled: the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of all Indigenous languages in Canada.