

First Nations Summit

May 11, 2017

Honourable Christy Clark, MLA
Premier of British Columbia
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Honourable John Rustad, MLA
Minister of Aboriginal Relations and
Reconciliation
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Honourable Peter Fassbender
Minister of Community, Sport and
Cultural Development
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Honourable Michael de Jong, MLA
Minister of Finance
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Dear Premier and Ministers:

Re: Supporting Revitalization of Indigenous Languages in BC

Language is the essence of our cultures and fundamental to our survival, dignity and well-being as Indigenous peoples. Language is our inherent right and is central to our cultural and spiritual identities as First Nations. Language is the medium by which First Nations citizens describe cultural practices, laws and customs, attachment to land and place, cultural items, and other cultural and spiritual activities. Furthermore, language plays a fundamental part in indigenous people's identity by connecting individuals to communities, therefore providing cultural and spiritual context in the daily lives of First Nations people.

The UN Secretary General stated on May 16, 2011, at the opening of the 10th Session of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues that an Indigenous language dies every two weeks. Additionally, the report of the 15th session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues stated that Indigenous languages form the bedrock of continuity for the survival and well-being of indigenous cultures from one generation to the next. The 15th session report further stated there is a growing crisis of indigenous language loss and in many cases an urgent, even desperate, need to preserve and revitalize languages. It is estimated that more than half of the world's languages will become extinct by 2100.

Aboriginal languages in BC make up an integral part of Aboriginal identity and culture and of Canadian heritage. Unfortunately, all Aboriginal languages in BC are critically endangered. As noted by National Geographic, BC has been identified as a world language "hotspot" where First Nations languages are literally "racing to extinction." Also, according to the *Report on the Status of BC First Nations Languages 2014*, fluent speakers of BC First Nations languages make up 4.08% (5,289) of the total population reported, with 59% of fluent speakers aged 65 and over. First Nations language learners make up 9.14% of the population, while only 52% of communities have any sort of language curriculum materials for teaching languages. Action is needed now to support the revitalization of BC First Nations languages. The preservation of Aboriginal languages is absolutely a priority for First Nations in BC.

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Article 13 of the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* [the Declaration] calls upon nations to take effective measures to protect the right of Indigenous peoples:

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.

Furthermore, Article 25 of the Declaration states:

"Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain their distinctive spiritual relationships with their...lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations..."

We were pleased to hear the Prime Minister's commitment in December 2016 to the development and enactment of 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. As BC is home to 60% of First Nations languages in Canada, with 34 unique languages, it is particularly important for First Nations, organizations and relevant councils in British Columbia to be directly involved in the co-development of any such Indigenous Languages Act.

We believe that both the federal and provincial governments have a moral and fiduciary duty to First Nations to help protect, revitalize and maintain our languages. Language rights, as part of cultural rights, where they are inadequately recognized or supported, must become important government public policy priorities. There is a need for political will and concrete actions to provide the resources needed to preserve and develop this heritage, in particular Indigenous languages.

The First Nations Summit Chiefs in Assembly reaffirm that efforts to preserve First Nations' languages are a priority. We urge the provincial government to stand with First Nations in BC to ensure our efforts to preserve First Nations languages are realized and to ensure that BC-based First Nations, organizations and relevant councils are properly represented in these efforts.

In that regard, we enclose for your consideration a signed copy of a resolution approved by the First Nations Summit Chiefs in Assembly supporting the development and enactment of an Indigenous Languages Act, and calling on the governments of Canada and British Columbia to ensure that all government-funded efforts and initiatives respecting Indigenous languages are consistently guided by the objectives of revitalization, preservation and protection of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit languages in this country.


Please have your officials contact Colin Braker at the First Nations Summit office via telephone (604 – 926 9903) or email (cbraker@fns.bc.ca) to engage in discussions to ensure the appropriate BC-based expertise in any Indigenous language initiatives going forward.

Yours sincerely,


FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT POLITICAL EXECUTIVE



Grand Chief Edward John



Robert Phillips



Cheryl Casimer

Enclosure [1] First Nations Summit Resolution #0217.11 (Supporting Revitalization of Indigenous Languages)

cc. Perry Bellegarde, National Chief, Assembly of First Nations
First Peoples' Cultural Council
BC Assembly of First Nations
Union of BC Indian Chiefs

FIRST NATIONS SUMMIT

RESOLUTION #0217.11

SUBJECT: SUPPORTING REVITALIZATION OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

WHEREAS:

A. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN Declaration) states:

- i. *Article 13 (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.*
- ii. *Article 14 (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.*

B. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Call to Action #14 states:

We call upon the federal government to enact an Aboriginal Languages Act that incorporates the following principles:

- i. *Aboriginal languages are a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society, and there is an urgency to preserve them.*
- ii. *Aboriginal language rights are reinforced by the Treaties.*
- iii. *The federal government has a responsibility to provide sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation.*
- iv. *The preservation, revitalization, and strengthening of Aboriginal languages and cultures are best managed by Aboriginal people and communities.*
- v. *Funding for Aboriginal language initiatives must reflect the diversity of Aboriginal languages.*

C. As stated in the report of the fifteenth session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Indigenous languages form the bedrock of continuity for the survival and well-being of indigenous cultures from one generation to the next. This important intergenerational responsibility has been severely disrupted by colonialism and colonial practices, laws, policies and practices of discrimination, assimilation, forced relocation and residential and boarding schools, among others.

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- D. The report further states there is a growing crisis of indigenous language loss and in many cases an urgent, even desperate, need to preserve and revitalize languages. It is estimated that more than half of the world's languages will become extinct by 2100.
- E. A significant underlying objective of all preservation and revitalization efforts is the absolute necessity of producing ever-growing numbers of fluent language speakers.
- F. On December 6, 2016, in an address to the Assembly of First Nations Special Chiefs Assembly, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau committed to the development and enactment of 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.
- G. First Nations in British Columbia have a vested interest in ensuring that initiatives aimed at the revitalization of Indigenous languages are:
 - i. developed collaboratively, with the full participation of First Nations in BC; and
 - ii. successfully accomplish revitalization for all Indigenous languages.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

That the First Nations Summit Chiefs in Assembly:

- i. support the development and enactment of an *Indigenous Languages Act*, co-developed with full participation of First Nations, organizations and relevant councils in British Columbia; and
- ii. call on the governments of Canada and British Columbia to ensure that all government funded efforts and initiatives respecting Indigenous languages are consistently guided by the objectives of revitalization, preservation and protection of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit languages in this country.


MOVED BY: Chief Maureen Chapman, Skawahlook First Nation

SECONDED BY: Chief Joe Bevan, Kitselas First Nation

DATED: February 10, 2017

Passed by consensus.

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ENDORSED BY: 
Cheryl Casimer


Robert Phillips


Grand Chief Edward John

