

Aboriginal Languages of Canada Bill

approved and passed by our senatorial ancestors, among others, cultural practices were outlawed and access to justice was denied to anyone who wanted to do anything about it.

Undoubtedly, residential schools were the single most significant attack on indigenous languages and cultures. One hundred and fifty thousand children were forcibly removed from their families under threat of prosecution for those parents who resisted and were placed in institutions for the sole purpose of indoctrinating them into Canadian society.

Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald not only believed that Aboriginal people who practised their culture and languages were savages but that they needed to have those cultures and languages stripped away. In 1883, in Parliament, he stated:

When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are Indian. He is simple a savage who can read and write.

It has been strongly impressed upon myself, as head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do

he asked his mother why she had never taught him the language, she told him simply, "Because I wanted to save your life."

In the Catholic school where she had been raised, she was taught that if she continued to practise her culture and to speak her language, she would end up in purgatory or in hell, places of eternal damnation. She simply wanted her children to have a chance at eternal life in heaven, so she refused to teach them their language.

This, I believe, was my deeply Catholic grandmother's motivation as well. But whatever the cause or motivation, the lack of transmission of language has contributed significantly to the fragile state of Aboriginal languages and culture in Canada today.

Many of the almost 90 surviving Aboriginal languages in Canada are under serious threat of extinction. In the 2011 Census, only 14.5 per cent of the Aboriginal population of Canada reported that their first language learned was an Aboriginal language. In the previous 2006 Census, 18 per cent of those who identified as Aboriginal reported an Aboriginal language as their first language learned. And a decade earlier, in the 1996 Census, the figure was 26 per cent. This indicates a drop in language use and transmission of nearly 50 per cent in the 15 years since the last residential schools were closed.

There are, however, variations among the Aboriginal populations: 63.7 per cent of Inuit speak their language compared to 22.4 per cent of First Nations people and only 2.5 per cent of Metis people.

Some languages are close to extinction because they have only a few remaining speakers of the great-grandparent generation. UNESCO says that 36 per cent of Canada's Aboriginal languages are being critically endangered in the sense that they are only used by the great-grandparent generation. They say 18 per cent are severely endangered in the sense that they are used by the grandparent generation, and 16 per cent are definitely endangered in the sense that they are used by the parental and the two previous generations combined.

The remaining languages are all vulnerable. If the preservation of Aboriginal languages does not become a priority both for governments and for Aboriginal communities, then what the residential schools failed to accomplish will come about through a process of systematic neglect.

In interpreting Aboriginal and treaty rights under section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982, the Supreme Court of Canada has stressed the relation of those rights to the preservation of distinct Aboriginal cultures. The preservation of Aboriginal languages is essential to identity and, given its past treatment, must be recognized as a legal right in Canada.

In the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, various calls to action were put forward to establish that point. Call to Action 13, for example, reads:

We call upon the federal government to acknowledge that Aboriginal rights include Aboriginal language rights.

At a time when government funding is most needed to protect Aboriginal languages and culture, Canada has not upheld commitments it previously made to fund such programs.

In 2002, the federal government under Prime Minister Chrétien promised that \$160 million would be set aside for the creation of a centre for Aboriginal languages and culture and a national language strategy. But in 2006, the government retreated from that commitment, pledging instead to spend only \$5 million per year in permanent funding for the Aboriginal Languages Initiative, which had been started in 1998. The ALI is a program of government-administered heritage subsidies. It is not based on the notion of a respectful nation-to-nation relationship between Canada and Aboriginal peoples. Nor does it provide Aboriginal people with the opportunity to make decisions for themselves about how to allocate scarce resources and how to administer programs.

Other than ALI, the only significant programs for language preservation are the Canada Territorial Language Accords, with a \$4.1 million budget, which support territorial government-

In the report of the TRC, we put forward a call to action dealing with the need for legislation. We also saw the need for an official with authority to promote Aboriginal languages and to monitor and report upon federal government funding support.

In addition to promoting the use of Aboriginal languages, that official, we felt, would also educate non-Aboriginal Canadians about the richness and value of Aboriginal languages and how strengthening those languages can enhance Canada's international reputation.

As I said at the outset, cultural and language revival are keys for Aboriginal youth in their search for identity, and it is a legitimate cause of complaint for survivors of residential schools and other forms of cultural suppression. Cultural and language revival are a binding force for the Aboriginal community. However, while there is a significant role for government to play in that revival, in the final analysis cultural and language revival are the responsibility of the communities that want them.

There is no getting away from the very simple fact that if you want your culture, you must live it; if you want your language, you must speak it.

I have some concerns about this bill, though I support it. In this respect I am not convinced it goes far enough. I don't think it goes as far as it could or should. I am nonetheless prepared to support the bill going on to committee in order t402640264(m8e17)6-3(23)60)6-26)mntgtn r