

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON CANADIAN HERITAGE
HOUSE OF COMMONS
OTTAWA**

BILL C-91 – AN ACT RESPECTING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

**OPENING STATEMENT – GRAND CHIEF ABEL BOSUM ON
BEHALF OF THE GRAND COUNCIL OF THE CREES (EEYOU
ISTCHEE)**

FEBRUARY 28, 2019

Opening Statement – Grand Chief Abel Bosum on behalf of the Cree Nation

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and Honourable Committee members.

My name is Grand Chief Abel Bosum. On behalf of the Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee (James Bay, Québec), I am pleased to appear before you today. I am accompanied by Dr. Sarah Pashagumskum, Chairperson, Cree School Board and CEO of Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute; Dorothy Stewart, Cree Language Coordinator, Social and Cultural Department; Tina Petawabano, Cree Nation Government; and Paul Joffe, Legal Counsel.

The Cree Nation of Eeyou Istchee includes more than 18,000 Eeyouch, or Cree, occupying our traditional territory of Eeyou Istchee. This territory covers around 400,000 square kilometers, and is located mainly to the east and south of James Bay and Hudson Bay with additional territories in Ontario.

The Social and Cultural Development Department is responsible for the Cree Nation Government's language program and policy.

Aanischaaukamikw Cree Cultural Institute is a museum, archive, library, and research and education centre. The Cree School Board, over the past decades, has played a large role in Cree language research and program development as a primary instrument for language maintenance in our territory.

Bill C-91

Let's now turn to Bill C-91. From the outset, we wish to acknowledge the potentially far-reaching significance of Bill C-91 - *An Act respecting Indigenous languages*.

At the same time, we fully recognize the important challenges associated with reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages. Clearly, there must be adequate space and flexibility to accommodate the perspectives and priorities of each Indigenous people or nation.

It is important to note that, according to the UN General Assembly, sustainable development includes language and cultural development. Also, there is a consensus that no one must be left behind. This explicitly includes Indigenous peoples.

In our experience, implementation and enforcement of legislation are always a challenge. In particular, adequate resources are urgently required to carry out the programs and other initiatives for language development and preservation at all stages. At this crucial point, we need more clarity in regard to the **specific global amounts** that the federal government is setting aside for at least the next five years. This will help our ongoing planning and other activities under Bill C-91.

Fluency in languages is recognized globally as the most important standard. We are pleased that Bill C-91 consistently refers to fluency as a key standard and objective.

In addition, we wish to underline the critical importance of the Bill linking Indigenous peoples' languages to the Calls to Action of the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission and to the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

At the same time, it is important to underline here that, as an Indigenous people with the right of self-determination, we view our rights in a holistic manner. All of our inherent or pre-existing rights are interrelated and interdependent. Our rights to language and culture cannot be separated from our other inherent rights, especially our rights to lands, territories and resources. With respect to Cree language and culture, the words we speak derive from our relationship with the land. The words, thoughts and worldviews that we pass on to our children are connected to the land.

These essential interrelationships are explicitly affirmed in the *UN Declaration*, in its 7th preambular paragraph:

Recognizing the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, **especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources ...**

Therefore, it is important to highlight the pressing need for umbrella legislation relating to the *UN Declaration*. Such legislation, namely Bill C-262, has already been passed by the House of Commons and it is currently in second reading in the Senate.

We are proud that Romeo Saganash, a member of our Cree Nation, sponsored Bill C-262 - the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act*. This Bill will advance the human rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada. It will also set an important precedent for Indigenous peoples in other countries worldwide.

As underlined in Call to Action #43, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls on the federal government and all other levels of government to implement the *UN Declaration* “as **the framework** for reconciliation”. Therefore, implementation of the *Declaration* is inseparable from the TRC Calls to Action. Any Member of Parliament that fails to support the *UN Declaration* is also undermining Canada’s national reconciliation initiative.

As highlighted in the preamble of Bill C-91, the year 2019 has been proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations as the International Year of Indigenous Languages to, among other things, “draw attention to the critical loss of Indigenous languages and the urgent need to maintain, revitalize and promote Indigenous languages”.

Such loss or severe impairment of Indigenous languages – whether through residential schools, dispossession of our lands, territories and resources, forced assimilation, destruction of culture, or other acts of colonialism – must be redressed in authentic ways. Such ways must respect our ability to determine for ourselves how we will maintain our language and the vehicles that we will utilize to do so.

We look forward to working harmoniously with the federal government and others to achieve the critical objectives of Bill C-91.

Thank you. Meegwetch. Merci.