

March 13, 2007

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper  
Prime Minister of Canada  
Parliament Buildings  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

The Honourable Jim S Prentice  
Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development  
And Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians  
Parliament Buildings  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

The Honourable Bev Oda  
Minister of Canadian Heritage  
Parliament Buildings  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

**Re: Letter Supporting the Preservation of \$160 Million Language Funding for First Nations**

Dear Prime Minister Stephen Harper,

We are writing to you in our capacity as linguists, language specialists, language workers, and supporters of language maintenance and renewal. Many of us have worked in First Nations communities, documenting the rich diversity of First Nations languages, providing support in the development of learning materials, or teaching language.

**Facts about First Nations languages in Canada:** Canada has a unique and extraordinarily rich linguistic heritage. Moreover, provinces such as British Columbia are well known as one of the most linguistically diverse and complex regions in the world. Approximately forty-five First Nations, Inuktitut, and Métis languages are spoken in Canada. The languages with the greatest number of speakers are Cree-Montagnais-Naskapi (60,000); Ojibwe (40,000); Inuktitut (20,000); Chipewyan (4,000-12,000); Mi'kmaq (3,000-5,000); Mohawk (3,800); Assiniboine (3,600); Slave (3,000); Babine, Dogrib, Carrier, Chilcotin, and Blackfoot (2,000 each); Gitksan and Malecite (1,000 each); Gwich'in (500 in Canada, 700 in Alaska); and Nisgha (700-1000). All of these languages are under pressure from the two official languages, English and French. The large number and diversity of Canadian First Nations languages poses a unique set of challenges for language maintenance and renewal, especially since most of the language groups face the loss of their last generation of fluent speakers within the next decade. Unlike other minority languages spoken in Canada, most Canadian First Nations languages are spoken nowhere else in the world. (A few languages are also spoken in the United States, but are similarly endangered.)

**Moral obligations:** Section 35(1) of the Canada Constitution Act 1982 states that “The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.” Although the Supreme Court of Canada has yet to comment on the status of Aboriginal languages under section 35(1), “existing aboriginal and treaty rights” were defined in the Supreme Court of Canada’s 1996 decision in *R. v. Van der Peet* as “...the practices, traditions and customs central to the Aboriginal societies that existed in North America prior to contact with the Europeans.”

Research has shown unequivocally that language is directly related to a sense of identity, and to the physical and economic health of individuals and of communities. Language is one of the most tangible symbols of cultural and group identity. It is the living expression of intellect, of specific cultural understanding, the link to the past, the key to future survival: language and its renewal play a vital role for communities to be healed and move forward equipped to build strengthening economies. In Canada, many Aboriginal languages are endangered. But there is an increasingly active and passionate movement in First Nations communities, particularly among the young, to make their languages fully alive again and in so doing to strengthen their communities and themselves. Aboriginal youth are the largest growing sector of the provincial population; the stronger their sense of identity, the greater their contribution to their own socio-economic well-being and that of the community and province. The human and economic costs of doing nothing to support language renewal, could be massive and irreparable.

**Political context:** In recognition of its legal and moral responsibilities towards First Nations languages, the Canadian government, through the Department of Canadian Heritage (DCH), established the Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) in 1998. ([http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/progs/ila-ali/guide\\_e.cfm](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/progs/ila-ali/guide_e.cfm)) A total of \$5 million per year was allocated for preserving Canadian First Nations languages, Inuktitut, and Michif. ALI funding is coordinated and monitored by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), who in turn allocates the responsibility for approving project proposals to ‘regional delivery agents’, including First Nations Cultural and Educational Centres. On December 19, 2002, the former Minister of Canadian Heritage, Sheila Copps, announced \$172.5 million in funding to establish and operate a new Aboriginal Languages and Cultures Centre (ALCC). This funding was to replace the ALI program. [http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/newsroom/index\\_e.cfm?fuseaction=displayDocument&DocIDCd=2N0327](http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/newsroom/index_e.cfm?fuseaction=displayDocument&DocIDCd=2N0327)

The Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures was formed in December 2003. ([http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/lang-cult\\_e.cfm](http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/lang-cult_e.cfm)) The task force consulted broadly with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis groups over the next two years in order to determine the best way to structure the ALCC and disburse ALCC funding. In June 2005, the Task Force foundational report was completed and presented to the Minister of Canadian Heritage. [http://www.aboriginallanguagetestaskforce.ca/e/e\\_index.html](http://www.aboriginallanguagetestaskforce.ca/e/e_index.html)

By 2006, the original \$172.5 million had become \$160 million. \$2.5 million was deemed to have been spent on the Task Force for Aboriginal Languages and Cultures. The remaining \$10 million was deemed to have been spent on a two-year extension of the ALI for 2003-4 and 2004-5. On Nov. 3, 2006, Minister Oda announced that the \$160 million allocated to this program was being cut from the budget. In place of this funding, she announced a \$40 million extension of the ALI program, with \$5 million per year to be allocated for the next eight years (until 2013 - 2014).

**Why extending the ALI program isn't enough:** After administration fees have been deducted (the Department of Canadian Heritage deducts an administration fee too), the funds remaining from the \$5 million per year are divided up between 10 provinces and thousands of communities. After undergoing a rigorous selection process, bands successfully applying for funding in British Columbia and Ontario typically are typically only able to obtain amounts averaging less than \$2000 per community project. No project is guaranteed continuing funding from year to year.

Welcome as this money is, it cannot even ensure that each language is documented properly, let alone fund crucial aspects of language maintenance and renewal such as development of language resources (dictionaries, grammars, textbooks, videos, tapes, story-books, etc.), language education and maintenance programs, and renewal implementation strategies. The current level of funding is not enough to make even one endangered language fully healthy again.

Currently, because of the scarcity of available funding relative to the need, communities are put in the divisive position of having to compete with each other for funding dollars; and funding agencies are forced to make heart-breakingly difficult decisions to fund some languages in their renewal efforts but not others. We therefore implore you and your government to take the necessary financial and structural steps to provide continued major support for language documentation and maintenance, language research and development, language learning, language teaching, and language renewal in all First Nations communities in Canada.

**Our recommendations:** We in Canada have the possibility of being world-leaders in language revitalization. There are many individuals in First Nations communities and many researchers who are committed to making a difference when it comes to language revitalization and research. Much good groundwork has been laid, and many local and institutional educational projects are making significant progress, but without adequate long-term funding and support, the opportunities facing Canada's First Nations communities to renew their ancestral languages and the cultural values and identities reflected in their languages will be lost forever.

We urge you and your government to reinstate the \$160 million, and consider instituting a larger and more stable long-term funding package. With such a contribution to language renewal, community renewal, and language rights, you would create a unique legacy within Canada, and indeed around the world. We sincerely hope that you and your government will take all the steps needed to meet this challenge.

<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~cla-acl/>

<http://www.fp.ucalgary.ca/aborlang/index.html>