

Opinion

Languages in self-governing First Nation communities critically endangered, it's time to act

Work cannot wait until the economy improves or inflation is under control—by then, many more speakers will have been lost. If Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples is truly its most important, then now is the time to provide support for the hard work we've done, to follow through on words with action.

Jackson Lafferty

Opinion



For Indigenous peoples, revitalizing our languages is one of the most critical elements of self-determination and healing. Our languages are at the heart of our cultures and identities, and the process of learning language is fundamental to building well-being and community. As self-governing First Nations, this is our most urgent area of work as we watch the number of fluent speakers decline year after year. We know what work needs to be done, and we need the resources required to do it effectively.

Years of experience by Indigenous communities worldwide has shown what is needed to be truly effective in the work of language revitalization. A focus on full-time immersion and active speaking is essential. We now know that a few hours of lessons a week will not revive a language. We are walking a difficult path, trying to overcome the ongoing effects of decades of language suppression. But we know how to do the work, and we need the support of our partners in reconciliation to do it.

The group of 25 self-governing First Nations has been working in collaboration with federal officials since 2016 to rebuild and develop Canada's fiscal policy on self-government. This policy is key to the new fiscal relationship promised by the government, and



Red Sky Performance dancers perform during the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation at the Canadian Museum of History on Sept. 30, 2019. For Indigenous peoples, revitalizing their native languages is one of the most critical elements of self-determination and healing, writes Jackson Lafferty. The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

it commits Canada to address our expenditure needs in the areas of our jurisdiction and responsibility.

Over the past two years, we have worked together to build a detailed model of the capacity and resources needed for self-governing First Nations to implement proven language revitalization programs with a track record of creating new speakers. Our research has identified full-time adult immersion cohort programs, preschool language nests, and mentor-apprentice partnerships as key programs. We must also support our "silent speakers"—those who can understand the language, but have not spoken it for years, due to suppression and shame.

Programs like full-time adult immersion cohorts have resulted in strong speakers after two years of focused work. In our research, we looked at the successes of Mowhawk, Coast Salish, and Southern Tl'chone communities with this approach. We also reviewed preschool language nests that lead to children being active speakers by age five, as seen with Secwépemc (Shushwam) and Hawaiian Pūnana Leo preschools. We did

the same in-depth research for all programs in the model, and assessed in detail what would be needed to implement it in self-governing First Nation communities. In short, we have done our homework, and we have done it in collaboration with federal officials.

Our leaders and language warriors have recently spent many hours with federal leaders and senior staff explaining our proposed approach, and the critical need to resource this work now. We call on all parliamentarians to stand with us and support the resourcing of our co-developed language model in the upcoming federal budget.

Not only is the federal government's support for our co-developed language model essential for implementing its treaty and policy commitments, it is also an investment that will pay huge dividends in wellbeing. People who have success with their language build strong personal identities and pride, and they in turn become an inspiration for others. There is a solid body of research on the links between language vitality and improved outcomes around health and education,

and lower rates of addiction and self-harm.

The Government of Canada has taken important first steps by passing the Indigenous Languages Act and through the recent settlement agreement that addresses impacts of residential schools on culture and language. However, these measures will only address a small portion of the costs involved with implementing proven programs that will revitalize and sustain our languages. We need your support to resource our co-developed model in the upcoming budget.

Virtually all the languages in self-governing First Nation communities are critically endangered, and we have a short time to take decisive action. This work cannot wait until the economy improves or inflation is fully under control—by then, many more speakers will have been lost. If Canada's relationship with Indigenous peoples is truly its most important one, then now is the time to provide support for the hard work we've done together, to follow through on words with action.

With respect and urgency,

Jackson Lafferty is the grand chief of Tl'chone government and the lead author on this op-ed by a coalition of Self-Governing First Nations. Other chiefs who signed off on this op-ed are: Chief Doris Bill (Kwanlin Dün First Nation); Chief Darcy Bear (Whitecap Dakota First Nation); Te'ok'ah'lo Danny Gaudet (Dél'ing Gaa'ing Government); Chief Jennifer Bone (Sioux Valley Dakota Nation); yil'mix'm (Chief) Robert Louie (Westbank First Nation); Hagus (Chief) John Hackett (Tla'amin Nation); Chief Robert Dennis (Hau-ay-ah't First Nations); Legislative Vice-Chief 'les'et' h' First Nations; Dan ná'the áda (Chief) Barb Joe (Champagne and Ashihik First Nations); Gaa Shade Hēni (Chief) Maria Benoit (Carcross/Taghish First Nation); Chief Amanda Leas (Tla'án Kwach'an Council); President Charles McCarthy (Yuu'uk'at'h Government); Chief Nicole Tom (Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation); President Eva Clayton (Nisga'a Lisims Government); and Hahkē (Chief) Roberta Joseph (T'ondé'k Hwēch'in).

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