



**Statement by Assembly of First Nations
National Chief Perry Bellegarde**

Tabling of Indigenous Languages Legislation

February 5, 2019

Ottawa, Ontario

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Tawaw kahkiyaw, okimâwak, nâpewak, iskwewak, kêhtêak, oskâyak. Okimaw piyasiw awasis nitisihkason. Miyo kisikaw anoch.

- I gave you a greeting and introduction in my language because language is very important to me personally, and action on First Nations languages has been a priority for First Nations for many years now.
- First Nations languages are national treasures, the first languages of these lands, found nowhere else in the world. They are what makes this country unique.
- Our languages embrace our identity and our worldview, our laws, our song and stories. They are a defining element of our status as Nations. They are fundamental to who we are as Indigenous peoples.
- Yet in Canada, no Indigenous language is safe.
- This is not an accident. This is the result of more than a century of sustained government policies and laws that tried to rob us of our languages, to sever our children from their cultures and identities.
- We need to put the same amount of time and energy into revitalizing our languages as Canada put into trying to eliminate them.
- Today, there is hope.
- The legislation tabled today will support First Nations efforts to protect and revitalize our languages.
- Studies show that when countries give formal recognition to Indigenous languages, the likelihood of their survival increases.
- This Bill is consistent with years of advocacy by First Nations and Indigenous peoples. It is consistent with the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It is consistent with our shared work towards reconciliation.
- This Bill is the result of years of advocacy by First Nations. We welcomed the Prime Minister's commitment at our AFN Assembly in December 2016 to begin this work – and, equally important, to work with us to co-develop legislation.
- The AFN's goal in co-developing the legislation was to ensure that First Nations perspectives, priorities and rights are reflected in the Bill.



- I thank the AFN Chiefs Committee on Languages for their hard work, and I thank all our Elders, experts, leaders and language champions for their efforts.
- Now, we all have a role to play in making language revitalization a reality.
- We must continue our work together on co-development right through to the implementation of the Bill.
- We want all parliamentarians to support this Bill. Canadians strongly support Indigenous languages legislation. They understand that language is culture. Language is identity. Languages is life.
- I would like to see all Canadians urging their representatives to support this Bill. This work is good for all Canadians.
- Research shows that people who acquire language fluency at a young age are more successful in school and more successful in life.
- We need this legislation to ensure sufficient, sustainable and long-term investments toward the revitalization of our languages.
- We need schools to create and implement effective bilingual and immersion education programs beginning with pre-school age children, and beyond.
- And we need programs that inspire all of our people – regardless of age - to speak their languages.
- We want our languages to be our living languages - sourced from our lands, expressing our creation stories, alive in our ceremonies and our daily lives.
- The Indigenous Languages Act is landmark legislation. We are collectively saying: “we will not let the residential schools win.”
- 2019 is the International Year of Indigenous Languages. I can think of no better way to mark this year than to see the country that tried to eliminate our languages enact a law – developed with us – to protect, promote and revitalize our languages.

Ekosi... Kininaskomitin