

One Land – Many Voices

by Steven Nitah, MLA

In 1984, the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) passed the Official Languages Ordinance which recognized English and French as official languages. The Ordinance also gave recognition to the Aboriginal languages of the NWT. In 1985, the Official Languages Ordinance became the Official Languages Act. This Act was amended in 1990 to recognize Cree, Chipewyan, Dogrib, Inuktitut, Inuvialuktun, Inuinnaqtun, Gwich'in, North Slavey, and South Slavey as official languages within institutions of the Legislative Assembly and GNWT, along with French and English. It also established the Office of the Languages Commissioner. Since that time, the government has been carrying out activities to promote the use of all official languages. A Special Committee on the Review of the Official Languages Act was established in 2000 as a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories. It tabled an interim report in June 2002. This article is based on the executive summary of the interim report.



The Special Committee was asked to review the effectiveness of the *Official Languages Act*. The Committee has had to respond to the following questions:

- Do people understand the *Official Languages Act*?
- Is the Act working to protect and preserve all of the official languages?
- Are the needs of the official languages being met?
- What can be done to improve the Act?
- What can be done to improve the delivery of language programs and services in the NWT?

Steven Nitah represents Tu Nedhe in the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly. He is Chair of the Special Committee on the Review of the Official Languages Act. Other members of the Committee are David Kruiko (Deputy Chair), Roger T. Allen, Brendan Bell, and Michael McLeod.

In the spring of 2001, the Committee hired staff and began to carry out planning and research activities. In October, the Committee hosted a territorial languages assembly in Yellowknife. Representatives from all the official language communities attended this gathering. The Committee also began to travel to communities throughout the NWT to meet with people who were concerned about their languages. At the same time, the Committee communicated regularly with all of the people and organizations interested in the NWT's official languages.

In March, the Committee held public hearings in Yellowknife. At these hearings, presentations were made by Aboriginal organizations, the francophone community, past and current territorial languages commissioners, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Senator Sibbeston and the Language Commissioner of Canada.

The Special Committee is continuing to do research on government language services, the Office of the Languages Commissioner, language education, and Aboriginal language rights. The Committee still has a few communities to visit and also plans to hold another terri-

torial languages assembly in the fall of 2002. Then, during the fall of 2002, the Committee will prepare its final report, which may recommend changes to the *Official Languages Act* and to the way the Act is implemented.

The Special Committee has learned that preserving our languages is very important. We express our special identity and culture through our language. If we truly want to preserve our distinct cultures, then we have to preserve our languages as well.

In order to preserve the official languages of the NWT, we have to use these languages on a day-to-day basis. This is not an easy task for the Aboriginal and French languages, because English is such a dominant language in the NWT and Canada. Preserving languages means that everyone in the NWT – including governments, community organizations, and individuals – has to make an effort to use our official languages more often.

Language Shift and Language Revitalization

“Language shift” refers to a significant decline or increase in language use. For example, if elders speak their traditional language, but their grandchildren speak only English, then language shift has occurred. Language shift usually happens because another language becomes dominant. It can also happen when people are forced to speak another language, through inter-cultural marriage, or when people move to an area where another language is spoken. In the NWT, statistics clearly show that use of the Aboriginal languages has declined over the past few generations. Some languages have declined more than others. French language use in the NWT also appears to be declining.

Taking steps to revive a language that has been declining is called “reversing language shift”. It can also be referred to as “language revitalization”, which is the term used in this report. Language revitalization usually begins with language planning. Over the past few years, each language community in the NWT has prepared a language plan and is now carrying out this plan. The francophone community has also been taking actions to preserve and promote the French language in the NWT. The GNWT has recently prepared an Aboriginal languages strategy for the NWT.

Effective planning for language revitalization focuses on helping families to teach and learn their traditional language in the home. It also includes creating a social

environment throughout the community that encourages and supports the use of a traditional language.

Language planning in the NWT is complicated by the fact that there are eleven official languages, along with different dialects within each of the Aboriginal languages.

Other countries in the world have carried out language revitalization activities. The most promising of these have generally combined:

- Language legislation
- Language research and preservation
- Language promotion
- Learning the traditional language in the home and family
- Language instruction in the schools
- Community-based language programming

Language History in the NWT

The Aboriginal and French languages did not have much government support in the NWT up until the 1970s. For many years, neither French nor the Aboriginal languages were officially recognized by the federal government in the NWT. In fact, the government had a policy of assimilation toward Aboriginal people. Aboriginal culture was not respected. Many Aboriginal people were forced to speak English in residential schools, and English was the working language of government and business.

Provincial and territorial boundaries established in Western Canada did not respect traditional Aboriginal nations. Language and cultural communities were split between different provincial and territorial jurisdictions, which made collective action more difficult.

In 1969, the *Official Languages Act of Canada* was passed. This Act recognized the language rights of francophones across Canada. In the same year, opposition to the Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, 1969 (the White Paper) forced the federal government to change its assimilation policy toward Aboriginal peoples.

In the early 1970s, government policies in the NWT began to change. The GNWT began to provide French language instruction in the schools. Aboriginal language programming was also developed for the schools. The government began to train and hire professional interpreter-translators. Language promotion activities were carried out.

Since 1984, the federal government has provided the GNWT with funding for French language services and the development of the Aboriginal languages. Government services have been provided, where reasonable, in all official languages. More recently, Aboriginal lan-

guage communities have taken significant responsibility for regional language planning and community projects. Divisional Education Councils have maintained responsibility for Aboriginal language instruction in the schools. A French language school board has been established to govern French first language programming.

The Condition of Our Languages

Throughout the NWT, less people are speaking the Aboriginal languages. Many Aboriginal people, particularly young people, now use English as their first language at home. Statistics indicate that approximately 25% of Aboriginal people under the age of 25 speak their traditional language (but these young speakers may not be as fluent as older speakers). By comparison, approximately 76% of Aboriginal people aged 45 years or older speak their language. These rates differ for each of the official Aboriginal languages. These rates also differ from community to community in the NWT.

This decline in Aboriginal language use is significant, because the NWT is the only homeland for the North Slavey and Dogrib languages and one of few homelands in the world for the other official Aboriginal languages.

Use of the French language among the francophone population also appears to be declining in the NWT. The only language that shows an increase in usage is English. English is the most common language used in homes throughout the NWT.

Each of the NWT's Aboriginal language communities has developed language goals. These goals generally include:

- Preserving the language (through oral histories, dictionaries, etc.)
- Promoting the importance of the language
- Developing language curricula and materials for the schools
- Training interpreter-translators and language instructors
- Supporting the languages through policy and legislation
- Strengthening school programs
- Coordinating community language projects

The francophone community has developed priorities that include promoting French language and culture, strengthening school programs, increasing French language services, and supporting French language media.

The GNWT is currently working with the official language communities to help them achieve their goals.

Language Rights

The United Nations has established protocols, conventions, and declarations to support language rights throughout the world. According to the UN, all people have the right to speak their own language. As well, education must develop respect for a child's cultural identity, language, and values. One international declaration states that people have the right to maintain their language within their own traditional territory. People who move into that territory must make an effort to adapt to the language and culture of the indigenous people.

In Canada, the *Constitution Act (1982)* provides that English and French have equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all institutions of Parliament and the Government of Canada. The *Constitution Act* also guarantees minority language education rights. This means that francophones can request and operate French language schools anywhere in Canada where there are enough francophone students. The *Constitution Act* also states that the Government must provide services in both French and English where there is significant demand. The *Official Languages Act (1988)* of Canada reaffirms and further defines language rights established through the *Constitution Act*.

Section 35(1) of the *Constitution Act* recognizes the "existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada." Aboriginal rights are not fully defined in the Act, but may include language rights. Aboriginal self-government agreements currently being negotiated in the NWT are beginning to address language rights issues.

The NWT and Nunavut are the only jurisdictions in Canada that recognize Aboriginal languages as official languages. The *Official Languages Act of the NWT (1990)* states that all official languages can be used in the Legislative Assembly. It also states that GNWT services may be provided in the official languages where there is sufficient demand. The Official Languages Commissioner is appointed to ensure that the government meets its obligations under the Act.

The *Official Languages Guidelines Manual (1997)* provides guidelines for the delivery of GNWT services in the official languages. The guidelines identify which languages may be used for government services in each community of the NWT. People should be informed that they have the right to use their language in certain designated areas.

The *Education Act (1996)* allows District Education Authorities (DEAs) to select the language of instruction for their schools. However, there must be sufficient demand, fluent teachers, and sufficient resource materials. For these reasons, among others, many DEAs have not

offered Aboriginal first language programs. French language rights are defined in the French First Language Education Regulations, which are attached to the *Education Act*. French language schools operate in Yellowknife and Hay River.

Many other NWT Acts contain references to language. In most cases, interpreters and/or translation must be used to provide essential information or services.

Funding and Accountability

The federal Department of Canadian Heritage provides the GNWT with approximately \$3.5 million per year for official languages. \$1.6 million of this funding is for French language services. The remaining \$1.9 million is to revitalize, maintain, and enhance the Aboriginal languages. These monies are managed by the GNWT Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE).

Most of the Aboriginal languages funding goes directly to language communities for community projects. The rest is used for Aboriginal language training, broadcasting, research, and material development. As well, the GNWT commits approximately \$7.1 million per year of its own money for the Aboriginal languages. Most of this money goes to the Divisional Education Councils (DECs) for Aboriginal language school programming.

French language funding goes primarily toward translation, bilingual bonuses, and French language advertising, signs, and printing. Some funding is also allocated to the francophone community for language projects. The Department of Canadian Heritage also provides ECE with approximately \$1.1 million per year for French language instruction in the schools.

GNWT departments must provide standard financial and activity reports regarding the Canadian Heritage funding. The Special Committee is continuing to review how federal and territorial funding is spent and accounted for. The Committee is also very interested in assessing what is accomplished with this funding.

Public Comments

Over the past year, the Special Committee has received many comments and suggestions from individuals and organizations. The most frequent of these have been summarized below:

- We need stronger and clearer legislation to support the official languages;
- We need strong leadership to address language issues, especially with the Aboriginal languages declining so rapidly;
- Funding needs to be better coordinated and accounted for;

- School instruction is very important, so we have to take immediate steps to train more teachers, establish curricula, develop resources, and provide effective language programs;
- We need family and community-based programs to support and reinforce school programs;
- We need to improve official language program and service delivery;
- We need to promote all of the official languages and change negative attitudes toward the Aboriginal languages and toward French.

Based on our research and public consultations, the Special Committee has prepared some guiding principles and strategic directions for change to stimulate discussion over the next few months. The second territorial languages assembly, which is scheduled for the fall of 2002, will provide a formal opportunity for further discussion of these guiding principles and directions.

Our Guiding Principles

In carrying out our work as a Special Committee, we have maintained the spirit and intent of the Preamble of the *Official Languages Act*. We have remained committed to the preservation, development and enhancement of the Aboriginal languages. We have maintained the belief that legal protection of the languages will assist in preserving our distinct Aboriginal cultures. We have upheld the desire to establish equality of status, rights, and privileges among all of the official languages.

In our work, we have also been guided by the following unofficial principles:

- Languages belong to their respective language communities;
- Language diversity is of value to all citizens in the NWT;
- Maintaining use of the official languages is a shared responsibility;
- Governance, funding, and service delivery must be clear, fair, consistent, efficient, and sustainable;
- A variety of language revitalization approaches must be utilized.

Our Strategic Directions for Change

We have prepared the following strategic directions for change in order to stimulate further discussion as we move toward preparing our final report. Some of these directions may not prove to be suitable. Others may require revision and refinement. Some people may want to consider other directions. We have numbered these directions for change so that they can be readily identified throughout our next round of discussions.

We might add the guiding principles noted above to the preamble of the *Official Languages Act*. We might also amend the *Official Languages Act* to:

- Apply the Act to all agencies and contractors that provide services on behalf of the government;
- Make one government body or agency accountable for the Act;
- Change and/or strengthen the role of the Languages Commissioner;
- Use proper Dene language terms in the Act;
- Ensure that the official languages listed in the Act adequately reflect current language communities in the NWT;
- Strengthen and clarify the Act through regulations and policy;
- Strengthen Aboriginal language rights within the *Official Languages Act* and/or *Education Act* and establish stronger linkages between the education system and language communities;
- Take a more structured approach to Aboriginal language instruction by developing proper language

curricula and resources, enhancing the training and certification of language instructors, utilizing immersion programming, and properly evaluating language proficiency;

- Provide more funding, and more consistent funding, for Aboriginal and French language programming and services, with special consideration for threatened languages;
- Improve the effectiveness and accountability of Aboriginal and French language program and service delivery systems, possibly through the establishment of official language service centres in designated areas, among other means;
- Establish stronger linkages between the GNWT and the language communities, possibly through regional language boards and/or a territorial languages board;
- Increase the functional use of the official languages through enhanced interpreter translator (I/T) services, language training, terminology development, and language promotion activities;
- Acknowledge that the official Aboriginal languages are in serious decline and take active and strong measures to revitalize them.