



## **Address**

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Government of Nunavut**

## **Arctic Indigenous Languages Symposium**

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## **UQAUSIVUT ATURLAVUT**

*Moving forward to implement our dream:  
Protecting and Promoting the Inuit Language*

The Inuit Language is at the heart of Inuit culture and identity. Language defines who we are as Nunavummiut. It reflects the generations who came before and their relationship to our Arctic environment. It shapes how we view our surroundings and how we wish our children to know their world. The Inuit Language is an essential part of our identity as a distinct people and jurisdiction within Canada and the wider circumpolar world.

More than three decades ago Inuit of Nunavut had a dream. It was about self-determination and autonomy. It was about creating a territory and a public government that would respond more appropriately to the linguistic, cultural and societal needs of Inuit.

In 1993 Inuit agreed to be partners with the Government of Canada by signing a comprehensive Nunavut Land Claims Agreement. That Agreement included the establishment of the Government of Nunavut in 1999. It entrenched the obligation of government to design and deliver programs and services responsive to the linguistic needs, goals and objectives of Inuit.

Nunavut is unique among Canadian jurisdictions. The *Nunavut Act* gives the Nunavut Legislative Assembly the authority to make laws in relation to the preservation, use and promotion of the Inuit Language. When doing this, existing rights regarding English and French must not be diminished. No other province or territory has been granted a similar delegation of authority by Parliament.

By using this authority we have reached an important milestone in the journey of realizing our dream for what Nunavut is and will become. After years of consultations, research and development, new language legislation was adopted in Nunavut to protect and promote the Inuit language in the most significant way.

The new *Official Languages Act* was approved by the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut in June 2008. As required by the *Nunavut Act*, it must receive approval

from the Canadian Parliament before it can be brought into force. Once that happens, Inuit in Nunavut will finally have a legal statement of their inherent right to use the Inuit Language in full equality with English and French. This status exceeds any other statutory protection now in place for Inuit or aboriginal people in Canada.

Nunavut took a further step in September to ensure that the Inuit Language is and will remain at the center of education, work and daily life in Nunavut. The *Inuit Language Protection Act* was approved and is now law in Nunavut. It provides us the legislative tools to ensure that positive actions are taken in four important respects:

1. to respect the inherent rights of Inuit including their equality and human dignity as members of Canadian society;
2. to respond to the pressures confronting the Inuit Language and its speakers to help reverse language shift among our young people, and to strengthen the use of the Inuit Language by all Nunavummiut;
3. to ensure Inuit Language speakers enjoy equal access to services and information;
4. There are some who see the *Inuit Language Protection Act* as also having remedial aims that relate to historical misconduct.

Taken together, these two pieces of legislation respond to a situation of inequity in Canadian laws. There was previously no clear legislative statement or decision affirming the linguistic rights of Inuit. There are some in Canadian society who deny that such rights even exist. Thus, these were vitally important actions for our government to take from a human rights perspective.

We are all aware that the Inuit Language is at risk in Canada and other circumpolar Inuit regions. The International community has issued dire warnings about the fate of indigenous languages around the globe.

The most recent Canadian census data show that only 64% of Inuit in Nunavut use the Inuit Language most often at home. That indicates a 12 % decline over 10 years since the last census data on this topic. With the dominance of English in many aspects of our society, youth are increasingly concerned about losing their ability to speak the Inuit Language. Young parents need support to pass on their ancestral heritage, skills, traditions and Inuit world-view to their children.

Social exclusion and access to services are also a long-standing concern. Unilingual Inuit, particularly our Elders, are multiply disadvantaged in their homeland. Because of language barriers, they do not have equal access to important and basic services that other Canadians enjoy. There are unilingual Inuit unable to access essential federal benefits because of the lack of information directed to them in the Inuit Language.

Lastly, we must consider the historical harms and errors that preceded the *Inuit Language Protection Act*. Canada's former residential schools are an example of an assimilation policy that resulted in language, cultural and identity loss among aboriginal children. We recently started the healing process with an apology made by the Canadian Prime Minister. However, there is still much to be done to remedy the negative impact of past adverse policies, bring back our pride, and increase the vitality of our Inuit Language and Culture.

Both Inuit Leaders and the United Nations have called for governments to immediately take actions to safeguard indigenous languages. Nunavut is answering that call, and is responding to the unique needs of Inuit who are disadvantaged regarding the use of their language.

Nunavut's language legislation has quasi-constitutional status and offers the highest level of legal authority within the power of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly. It is fundamental human right legislation which affirms the inherent right of Inuit to use the Inuit Language. It outlines the actions that the Government of Nunavut is required to take to protect and promote it. At the same time it upholds our commitment to the English and French language rights of our citizens.

The *Inuit Language Protection Act's* key provisions ensure the Inuit Language is:

- A language of instruction in a school system that prepares children to enter adult life having a rich knowledge of the Inuit language and full ability to use it; and
- A language of work in territorial government institutions thus supporting a representative public service and the full participation of Inuit in it; and
- A language used daily in services and communication with the public throughout all sectors of Nunavut society;

The Act also supports the importance of the use of the Inuit Language in early childhood and adult education. It addresses the need for language revitalization, particularly in communities and age groups most at risk. The *Inuit Uqausinginnik Taiguusiliuqtiit* has not yet been implemented, but the Act requires this body to expand the knowledge and expertise available about the Inuit language, and to develop language standards and terminology for day to day use.

Implementation will take time over the next several years, and support from various stakeholders, including the federal government, is crucial to the success of this legislation.

In conclusion I note both a success and a continuing concern. Nunavut's *Official Languages Act* and *Inuit Language Protection Act* stand out as examples of powerful human rights legislation. They empower Inuit to protect and promote the Inuit Language. They represent a significant achievement for our still new government.

Notwithstanding this success, the Government of Nunavut remains concerned regarding the lack of understanding by the Government of Canada about the resources necessary to achieve substantive equality for the Inuit Language.

Substantial funding is provided by the federal government to support the vitality of French and English speaking minority communities. By comparison, the programs and funding provided to support aboriginal languages in Canada are inadequate, lack coordination and the funding does not satisfy the federal commitment to honour the human and cultural rights of indigenous linguistic rights holders. Despite, being left largely on its own to address the Inuit Language needs of its population, Nunavut is determined to discharge our legislative responsibilities to the full extent that we are able.

Because the Inuit Language is integral to the social welfare and prospects of Inuit, and does not coincide with provincial, territorial or national borders, we would advocate the need for a positive contribution at the national level, for example, the federal government should work with us to promote the public prestige and acceptance of the Inuit Language and its speakers, and should respond more effectively to the needs for regular monitoring and data analysis concerning the Inuit Language and its speakers. These are just a few of many important roles.

All of us here today must increase our collective involvement in inter-regional, international and intergovernmental activities that strengthen the use of the Inuit Language across the Arctic. That should include:

- Increased communications and exchanges of information between circumpolar regions using television, radio, print, the Internet and other new digital media;
- Recognizing the value of the Inuit Language, cultural and oral tradition to development "with culture" in Canada's North, supporting national and international initiatives and cooperation in the arts and culture sectors;
- Developing, implementing and sharing best practices in Inuit Language instruction, curriculum development, and teacher training and providing more opportunities for student and teacher exchanges;
- Supporting international collaboration in language development and standardization that strengthens the use of the Inuit Language in the Arctic.

It was my pleasure to be here today and share information on our new language legislation. I look forward to further collaboration with you on activities to support indigenous languages.