

President's Speech  
Remarks to 2008 Arctic Indigenous Language Symposium  
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in

- \* Education
- \* Language

‘Good Intentions Are Not Enough’  
Tromso, Norway  
Mary Simon, National President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami  
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goddag (hello in Norwegian), ullakuut,

Thank you, for that warm welcome and for inviting me to Tromso to speak on a subject of enormous importance to me – the future of our Inuit Language in Canada - Inuktitut.

Of course, I am delighted to be back in Norway, A country I have visited a number of times in various roles from which I have many fond memories.

Today, in 2008, indigenous peoples of the circumpolar world are facing many challenging issues relating to our environment our economies and the social conditions in our communities. But I do not think there is an issue that speaks more to who we are and how we are doing than the state of our indigenous languages.

And it is for this reason that I never hesitate to travel great distances to discuss and exchange ideas on how to preserve and revitalize our languages.

It is always encouraging and motivating for me to be in a room full of people committed to holding on to the language we have, and bringing about a new era of Indigenous language growth and development – so I want to thank you for traveling here this week to contribute to these important discussions on our Arctic indigenous languages.

Before I begin my remarks today, I want to extend a thank you to the Department of Canadian Heritage for committing to sponsor this symposium, and to the Arctic Council Sustainable Development Working Group for the vision to hold this conference during this period when Norway is chair of the Arctic Council.

I will be speaking today about what is happening in Canada regarding indigenous language development that we are going through right now but my remarks have been prepared with other circumpolar countries in mind – because I know that we all share similar experiences of adversity in seeing our languages threatened .and that we all share a commitment to reversing this trend.

The title of my remarks today is ‘Good Intentions are not Enough’.

Now, what do I mean by this?

I mean that to realize a vision of when it is normal throughout Canada for Inuit children to graduate from high school bilingual in their mother tongue Inuktitut and English or French it must take a deliberate strategy of policy changes in our country.

When I say that ‘good intentions are not enough’ I mean that to get to the day when it will be normal for our children to achieve their linguistic skills not only at home and in the community but through subjects such as math and history taught by Inuktitut speaking teachers using Inuit Language textbooks and curriculum materials it must take more than hope because, as the saying goes, hope is not a plan.

For our Inuit children to have the same opportunity to become well-grounded in their language and culture –as English and French speaking children have today in Canada – we must have more than good intentions we must be very deliberate in causing shifts to occur that will change how our countries accept and support our indigenous languages.

And I am cautiously optimistic that in Canada, some of the key pieces for the shift to take place to implement our vision are beginning to be set in place.

Since Inuit in Canada first began getting organized in the 1970’s, we have dedicated a great deal of our political effort to securing rights over our land and resources through the negotiation of land claims agreements in each of our four Inuit regions.

And I am delighted to report that last year Inuit completed negotiations on the fourth and final regional Inuit Land Claims Agreement in Nunatsiavut, northern Labrador.

On many occasions over this period of political development, Inuit expressed their hope and desire that our language – Inuktitut – would be preserved, promoted and in some of our regions, revitalized.

Through the good work of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, and regional Inuit organizations, there were language commissions, and numerous language initiatives all aimed at securing the health of our language.

These initiatives to stabilize and grow our language were in response to what we are seeing in our communities everyday:

- \* Inuktitut as the language in the home was declining.
- \* In 2006, about 25,500 Inuit, 50% of the total number of Inuit in Canada, reported that Inuktitut was their home language, down 8%, from when it was measured 10 years earlier.
- \* Only 15% of Inuit living in urban areas reported being able to converse in Inuktitut compared with 84% in Inuit Nunaat, our Arctic homeland in Canada.

\* Our education systems were at various stages of emerging from the long shadow of dominant language teaching where Inuktitut had been forbidden or marginalized.

Over the years, the response by our government to our appeal for recognition and preservation of our language resulted in sporadic and fragmented support usually tied to short-term initiatives launched under the general title of 'cultural programming'.

And this is what I mean by "good intentions are not enough" because for all the good work we put into promoting the importance of our indigenous languages until there is a substantive shift in belief by our governments about the value of our language to the health of our people and the health of our communities language initiatives will be forever condemned to the whim of 'on again off again' funding for 'general cultural programming' by our government.

I believe that the first step to move us beyond good intentions is awakening our governments to the legitimacy and validity of our indigenous languages.

Our language is not just something that needs the odd program of support under the 'catch all' of cultural programming. It is much more than that our language is who and what we are and the health of our language lies at the core of our well-being.

Earlier this year Canadians witnessed what I believe. is the first small step by the Canadian government in shifting their view and their core belief on the role our language plays in our well-being.

In June this year in our Canadian Parliament our Prime Minister, Stephen Harper delivered a historic Apology to First Nations and Inuit for their experiences in residential schools.

The Prime Minister's Apology recognized our long recovery from the experience of Canadian government education policy that removed and isolated our children from their parents by sending them to residential schools and in so doing, isolating our children from our culture and isolating our children from our language during those critical years when a first language is learned.

The Prime Minister's Apology finally gave voice and recognition to what we, as Inuit, have been saying for many, many years. that the education system built by our government has had 'profoundly negative' consequences and 'damaging impact' on our Inuit language.

In my response in Parliament to the Prime Minister's Apology I told him that our Language – one of Canada's original languages – is still strong. I wanted him to hear this message because despite the many years of adversity that our Inuit language has faced – our language does remain rich, and alive, and spoken by enough Inuit across Inuit Nunaat to give hope for its long term survival.

I also told the Prime Minister that as a result of this historic apology, I felt that a “new day had dawned” for “building a new relationship with Inuit”

And I sincerely believe this .that we are at a point in our history, where reversing this long decline in our language. is possible because this historic Apology signifies a shift in attitude about the importance of our Inuit Language.

The Apology came at a time when there is a growing body of research supporting our view that indigenous language education is key to the health of our communities.

Earlier this year the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues published an ‘Expert Paper’ on “Indigenous Children’s Education and Languages”, and I encourage all of you to read this report.

Five international experts in indigenous studies examined the published research on indigenous children learning in schools where the language of instruction was a dominant language, such as English.

Since the beginning of formal schooling for Inuit, we have faced a policy of dominant language teaching in English or French. My own experience in northern Quebec was entering a federal school at age six, speaking only Inuktitut, and being told I would be punished if I was heard speaking my own language.

The main conclusion of the UN Expert Panel after examining all the research was this (and I quote): “the greatest predictor of long-term success in school for indigenous children is how long they receive instruction through their first language. The length of time students receive education in their mother tongue “is more important than any other factor (including socio-economic status) in predicting the educational success of bilingual students. The worst results are with students in programs where the student’s mother tongues are not supported at all, or where they are only taught as subjects”.

The UN Expert Panel also made reference to two un agreements– the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights , and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, both agreements of which Canada is a signatory to, and both of which speak to the right of all children to education.

The Expert Panel wrote,  
”given what we know about the effects of enforced dominant language education policies, that result not only in considerably poorer performance results but also higher levels of non-completion (of school), the pursuit of such policies could be said to be contrary to the right of (indigenous children) to an education.”

In other words, if the model of education chosen for a school does not allow indigenous children to be educated through a language the child understands, the child is effectively being denied access to their right of an education.

We should be viewing and arguing for education in our indigenous languages as a human right!

Viewing our language as a right and not simply a cultural aspiration (and it is both), opens up all sorts of arguments in defence of supporting the growth of development of our language. In Canada for example, there is an emerging discussion among legal experts that Section 35 of our 1982 Constitution Act may give Inuit and other aboriginal peoples enforceable rights to publicly funded aboriginal language programming.

So I believe we are at a point in Canada where a shift is occurring marked in a historic way by the Apology and supported by emerging research, legal arguments, and international voices that acknowledges the role of our language Inuktitut in the health of our communities, and the right of Inuit to learn in their language. I also believe that Inuit must take full advantage of the opportunity presented to us by this apology.

The second shift that needs to occur to move us beyond 'good intentions' is a shift in the policy processes and political power that supports our indigenous language.

what do I mean by this?

I mean that to reclaim the legitimacy of our mother tongue, and revitalize its value in our communities, we must control our education systems and transform our government agencies and policies.

Of course, this does not happen overnight.

In 1978, following the settlement of their Land claims, the Inuit of Nunavik - Northern Quebec took control of their education system and established the Kativik School Board. This year marks their 30th anniversary.

Today, the Kativik School Board system offers children in Nunavik instruction in Inuktitut until Grade 3 and then in Grade 4 parents choose English or French as a second language. The objective of the school system is for students to master Inuktitut and have a proficiency in a second language.

Our newest Inuit self-government – in Nunatsiavut, northern Labrador, will soon take control of their education system as a result of the land Claims agreement.

And in Nunavut, Canada's newest territory, where 85% of the population is Inuit, their public education system and government agencies are undergoing a transformation.

Just last month, the Government of Nunavut enacted two historic pieces of legislation a new Education Act that will set a unprecedented course for education in that territory a bilingual system based on Inuit cultural values and the Government of Nunavut also passed an Inuit Language Protection Act aimed at reversing the language decline among

Inuit, through measures that ensure Inuktitut will be used daily in services and communications with the public.

When he introduced the legislation, Nunavut's Minister of Culture, Language, Elder's and Youth, the Honourable Louis Tapardjuk, said and I quote : "There is an absence in Canadian society of understanding, respect, and basic rights and the means that are necessary to achieve some sense of equality between speakers of the Inuit language and those that speak the other two official languages".(end quote)

By introducing new laws, Minister Tapardjuk was taking 'the means that are necessary', and that were possible through his role as a lawmaker, to enable a shift to take place in society that gives greater legitimacy to our Inuit Language.

And these 'necessary means', such as passing enabling legislation to protect our Inuit languages, must also be pursued at a national level.

An unprecedented policy shift also occurred recently in the Government of Canada's, Senate. Through the determined efforts of 2 Inuit Senators – Senator Charlie Watt, and Senator Willie Adams, Inuktitut became the first aboriginal language to be used in the Senate chamber and two Senate committees.

The formation of new indigenous or public governments the introduction of new legislation or policies in support of our language the systematic transformation of our education systems. These are examples of what I mean by the 2nd step that needs to happen beyond 'good intentions' and that is taking concrete measures that change the configuration of policies and practices and power. In society that will legitimize our Inuit Language more.

The third shift that needs to take place for our Indigenous languages to reverse their decline and take hold in our communities is support for the development of new institutions and programs that support the growth and development of our language.

As many of you know, the Maori of New Zealand are considered to have one of the most successful language revitalization programs in the world.

There is not the time today to go into the many reasons for their success in revitalizing the Maori Language, but I do want to mention one of their key investments – and that is the establishment in 2002, of the national Institute of Research Excellence for Maori.

This investment has made it possible for over 2000 Maori scholars, community members and international academics to engage in new research publish the results of this research and contribute to the overall knowledge about Maori.

These types of key investments in institutions that support the growth of our language and culture, and promote the development of our linguists and scholars, is essential to

ensuring that the next phase of our Indigenous Language programming is about growth and development.

For these reasons, my organization, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami has put forward a number of policy proposals to our Canadian government that speak to this need for an institutional capacity to support our language -Inuktitut.

First, we have submitted a proposal for the establishment of an Inuit Knowledge Centre that will be the focus for research on and by Inuit and foster the next generation of Inuit scholars.

We have said that while universities have been a productive partner for many years in an Inuit Research agenda, Inuit also have expertise to think about, write about and interpret our own culture. An Inuit Knowledge Centre would serve to boost the legitimacy and value of Inuit knowledge in research initiatives.

Secondly, as a result of our recent Summit on Inuit Education, ITK is also proposing that an Inuit Language Development Institute be established to serve as a Centre of Excellence linking language preservation and revitalization efforts in the 4 Inuit regions.

Right now, there is very little national capacity to coordinate the revitalization efforts for the Inuit language. The Inuktitut Language centre would link language preservation and revitalization efforts in our 4 Inuit regions and support efforts to produce Inuit language instruction materials, language research, elder vocabulary documentation and it would coordinate an annual language symposium.

Thirdly, we have stressed to our government that the road to language revitalization lies in an investment that will accelerate the number of Inuit educators and service providers we graduate each year.

We have a labour shortage when it comes to Inuktitut speaking teachers and daycare workers. Our Teacher Education programs and service provider programs must increase their number of graduates through a new level of investment that closes this gap in our labour market.

These new initiatives along with support for the numerous language initiatives that are advanced in our regional centres and our communities and the exciting new possibilities for promoting the development of our language through technology and media should come under the umbrella of multi-year language agreement with our government.

So this is what I mean by the third shift that needs to happen beyond ‘good intentions’ and that is establishing a specific multi-year language agreement with our government that makes strategic investments in key language initiatives aimed at growing and developing our language.

Redress for an education policy that so systematically weakened our language must involve acceptance by our government that our determined effort at reclaiming our language needs a long-term commitment of support.

This commitment involves our government accepting that Inuit will define the new narrative for our people and fundamental to that narrative is the restoration of a healthy and vibrant Inuktitut language.

- \* Firstly, through our work as leaders, and community organizers, and linguists and media experts we must push our governments to recognize that our language goals cannot be boxed into narrowly defined cultural programs, but rather must be viewed as a right, and a measure of the health of our communities.

- \* Secondly, we must seize every opportunity, as Minister Tapardjuk did in Nunavut, and our Inuit Senators did in the Canadian Senate, to facilitate a shift in policy processes, and in the political power, that supports our indigenous language, and

- \* Thirdly, we must work tirelessly at promoting the emergence of new institutions and programs that foster the growth and development of our language.

And surrounding these fundamental shifts must be our continued effort to promote and value our language in our communities, in our schools and our homes.

- \* We must develop a new generation of school administrators who are willing to implement a bold vision of bilingualism for our schools.

- \* We must encourage our established Inuit educators and elders writing curriculum material and serving as leaders and mentors for the new generation of younger teachers, and,

- \* We need to communicate our ideas on language to parents in order to build their support for promoting language use at home.

Each generation must decide if it wants to settle for the world of their parents, or if they want to improve upon the past.

In Canada, through no fault or intention of our parents they were part of a generation of national education policy that had catastrophic consequences for our language.

I believe it is our responsibility to honour our parents and elders and past generations by leading a new era in language revitalization.

I believe it is our responsibility to use our skills in politics, our knowledge of technology and public policy as our tools of action to move our governments beyond their statements of good intentions, into a new era – that will look at the health of our languages as a measure of our well-being.

Our tools of action must challenge the assumptions that have characterized our governments approach to our aboriginal languages that our language is in some way not as legitimate or not as useful as the dominant languages.



Our tools of action must be transformative in their aims and take place at all levels, from our communities to the highest level of government.

When you leave Tromso later this week, I hope you will be carrying with you a briefcase full of ideas and a network of contacts for pushing your language initiatives to their next level. These are your tools of action and it will be through your collective energy and your ideas that change will happen.

As leaders, as practitioners, as media experts, as linguists, we must get up every day and put into practice a vision for our indigenous languages in our homes and our businesses, our schools, and in our church and community organizations.

Those of us who hold positions of social influence in our communities and by that I mean educators, and elders, and language committee members, and community leaders we must continue to be or become...language champions.

Over the next two days, I look forward to exchanging ideas with you on where and how we can use your ideas to launch a new era of growth and vibrancy for our indigenous languages.

Nakurmiik, takk (thank you)