

Wednesday, June 26, 2019

## **OPEN LETTER to the World's Language Commissioners**

(attending the International Association of Language Commissioners' Conference in Toronto, June 26-27, 2019)

### **RE: Canada must protect Inuktut, the majority language in Nunavut**

Dear Language Commissioners,

Today you are [meeting in Toronto](#) to "explore the pivotal role of language ombudsmen in the protection of minority-language communities and ...highlight institutions that promote and protect Indigenous languages in light of the UN's International Year of Indigenous Languages." We, who have research background in Nunavut, ask that you spend some time considering the dire situation of the Inuit language there.

In her [appeal to Canadians](#) last month, the representative of Inuit in Nunavut, President Aluki Kotierk of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) said:

*The modernization of the Official Languages Act must capture the current, modern jurisdictional map of Canada and recognize that Inuktut is the mother tongue, and the language most used, by the public majority in Nunavut...the modernization of the Official Languages Act is an opportunity to recognize that the founding languages of this nation includes Inuktut...*

*Inuit have been clear that essential services must be available, in Inuktut, for Inuit in the areas of health, education and justice. It is a matter of life and death....Inuit Canadians should not be dying because they are unable to access and receive essential services on an equitable basis with other Canadians.*

You may be shocked to learn of the race-based foundations of Canada's *Official Languages Act (OLA)*.

The [OLA was recommended](#) by the 1968 *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism* to help "develop the Canadian Confederation on the basis of an equal

partnership between the two founding races" of English and French ([OLC website](#)). The *Royal Commission* noted: "we...will not examine the question of ...the Eskimos... Since it is obvious that [they]... do not form part of the 'founding races'" ([Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism](#), 1967 pg xxvi).

So far, Canada has been unwilling to revise its OLA to address the jurisdiction of Nunavut, founded by Inuit, and not founded by either the English or French 'races'.

Inuit pay taxes. Inuit are the majority public in Nunavut. The homogeneous majority language of Nunavut is Inuktitut—not English nor French— yet Inuktitut is nowhere mentioned or protected in Canada's OLA, 20 years after the establishment of Nunavut. From its inception, Nunavut has been classified by Canada as “majority English, minority French, and ‘other’”, ([Language Highlight Tables](#), 2001 Census, Statcan). Canada has ‘disappeared’ the Inuktitut majority population.

Nunavut’s former Languages Commissioner, Sandra Inuitiq, put it this way when she [addressed](#) the *UN International Expert Group on Indigenous Languages* in New York in 2016: “The effect is that it creates a hierarchy of languages where English is first, French is second and the Inuit language is last. The symbolic effect is not lost on Nunavut.”

Canada classifies the majority public of Nunavut as Official Language English. This is colonial, unjust and wrong.

During her 2004 visit to Nunavut, Dyane Adam, the Official Languages Commissioner of Canada, “took particular interest in Nunavut’s case, as the territory remains the only jurisdiction in Canada where both official languages are generally considered minority languages” ([Nunatsiaq News, Sept 17, 2004](#)). Canada's erroneous classification of English as the majority language of Nunavut suffocates Inuktitut and is driving it out of use at a rate of [12% per decade](#).

[Canada’s Official Languages Act](#) gives only two options for Nunavut: "provide opportunities for members of English *or* French linguistic minority communities to be educated in their own language." Not both.

Canada contributes [\\$1.4 million annually](#) to a French language school in Iqaluit—for 90 students at one school; that's equivalent to \$15,555 each. How much money does Canada transfer to Nunavut’s 42 other schools for Inuktitut? Zero.

Two weeks ago, in a shocking move, Nunavut's territorial public government announced legislation to [roll back Inuktitut education rights](#) until 2039. This would never have been done if Canada protected Inuktitut. It would never be done to French education in Nunavut.

While English schooling erodes Inuktitut across Nunavut, Canada's colonial and outdated OLA also means no federal requirement for government services in Inuktitut. This creates situations that are unhealthy, [unsafe](#), and [life threatening](#). Inuktitut-speakers have [died in hospital](#). Pharmaceuticals are [not translated](#) reliably into Inuktitut. Inuktitut-speakers cannot get services in their language from the Coast Guard, the RCMP, or the CRA. Nunavut is the only jurisdiction in Canada where the majority public is policed by a force that [doesn't speak their language](#).

In 1993, Canada modified its Charter of Rights ([Section 16.1](#)) to reflect the unique bilingual character of New Brunswick. Since Nunavut is a territory and not a province, Canada can similarly enact protection for Inuktitut, English and French in Nunavut with a simple majority act of Parliament.

As Inuit President Kotierk recently [said](#):

*Canada was a world leader 50 years ago, in affirming more than one official language. Today, the country can remain a world leader by affirming the official language status of an Indigenous language in a jurisdiction where it is the public majority language. It is entirely open to the federal government to give statutory official status protection to Inuktitut within Nunavut, without impairing the Constitutional rights pertaining to French and English. Canada, as a country, needs to make this commitment....*

We ask you, the Language Commissioners of the World, to consider what is happening in Nunavut. Nunavut is 20% of Canada's landmass, and 60% of its coastline. This year marks twenty years since Nunavut's territory was brought into confederation, but its language is still left outside.

We ask you, the Language Commissioners of the World to demand that Canada modernize its Official Languages Act to protect and support Inuktitut, the voice of Nunavut.

Signed:

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