

Government programs

At a time when government funding is most needed to protect Aboriginal languages and culture, Canada has not upheld commitments it previously made to fund such programs. In 2002, the federal government promised \$160 million for the creation of a centre for Aboriginal languages and culture and a national language strategy.⁸⁹ But, in 2006, the government retreated from that commitment, pledging instead to spend \$5 million per year in “permanent funding” for the Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI), which had been started in 1998.⁹⁰ The ALI is a program of government-administered heritage subsidies. It is not based on the notion of respectful nation-to-nation relations between Canada and Aboriginal peoples. Neither does it provide Aboriginal people with the opportunity to make decisions for themselves about how to allocate scarce resources and how to administer programs. Many who appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada were skeptical about the government’s commitment to preserve Aboriginal languages. As Michael Sillett told us, “I cannot see the federal government putting out the money that’s necessary for full restitution, you know.... I can’t bring back my language; I lost that. I lost my culture, you know.”⁹¹

Other than ALI, the only significant programs for language preservation are the Canada-Territorial Language Accords (\$4.1 million annual budget), which support territorial government-directed Aboriginal language services, supports, and community projects in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. In Yukon, language revitalization and preservation projects are supported through transfer agreements with ten of the eleven self-governing Yukon First Nations.⁹²

The combined total annual federal budget for these Aboriginal languages programs is \$9.1 million. By way of comparison, the Official Languages Program for English and French is projected to receive funding as follows:

- 2012–13: \$353.3 million
- 2013–14: \$348.2 million
- 2014–15: \$348.2 million⁹³

The resources committed to Aboriginal language programs are far fewer than what is committed to French in areas where French speakers are in the minority. For example, the federal government provides support to the small minority of francophones in Nunavut in the amount of approximately \$4,000 per individual annually. In contrast, funding to support Inuit-language initiatives is estimated at \$44 per Inuk per year.⁹⁴

The Commission believes that a multi-pronged approach to Aboriginal language preservation—if implemented, honourably resourced, and sustained—might prevent further increase in the litigation of Aboriginal language rights, and the increased international criticism of Canada’s policy towards Aboriginal-language rights. This approach will require full, good-faith consultation, which recognizes that although Aboriginal communities have the necessary knowledge, particularly among their Elders, to preserve their