

Intelligence MEMOS



Federal budgets are an annual rite of spring in Ottawa, as is the deluge of advice to the Department of Finance. But budget-making is a yearlong process, and the work is now in progress. Accordingly, the C.D. Howe Institute is presenting a series of Intelligence Memos in the next few weeks, outlining recommendations that we hope will help inform the policy decisions that are being made now.

From: Don Drummond
To: The Honourable Bill Morneau, Minister of Finance
Date: November 12, 2018
Re: **MAKING GOOD ON THE PROMISE TO SUPPORT INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES**

The federal government is well into the process of crafting the 2019 Budget. It will be an important and difficult budget: Important in that it will, to a large degree, set the framework for the Liberals' 2019 election campaign; difficult in that the Liberals will be constrained in any new initiatives by the sea of projected deficits left in the wake of the 2018 budget.

Within this challenging environment the budget must find room for the legislative and fiscal consequences of the Prime Minister's 2016 promise to create a national Indigenous Languages Act. The Act is being co-developed by the Government of Canada, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit Tapirit Kanatami and the Métis Nation. The legislation will acknowledge Ottawa's financial responsibility to reclaim, revitalize and preserve Indigenous languages in Canada. More than 70 Indigenous languages have been identified with around 65 being First Nations languages. Funding in the 2019 Budget must go well beyond the modest down payments made to date.

UNESCO reports that three-quarters of Indigenous languages in Canada are "definitely," "severely" or "critically" endangered. In the 2016 Census only 20 percent of First Nations people could converse in an Indigenous language, down almost 6 percentage points from 2006. In many communities only a few elders can speak the language.

Reports such as the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the First Peoples' Cultural Council have eloquently described the importance of Indigenous language for the well-being of Indigenous individuals and communities. They have drawn the link between cultural, socio-emotional and spiritual purpose associated with language and the capacity to address health, social and economic problems.

The Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) has provided less than \$5 million per year for several years. In the 2016 Budget, \$275 million was provided over 5 years (an average of \$55 million per year) to support language and cultural programming in primary and secondary schools on reserve. The 2017 Budget increased ALI funding to \$89.9 million over 3 years (averaging almost \$30 million per year). Based on extrapolation of costs in communities actively involved in language initiatives in Canada and worldwide, it is estimated that Indigenous language reclamation, revitalization and preservation will require between \$500 million and \$1 billion per year; more than 10 times the current financial commitment. The funding could be phased in to a degree, but some costs, such as documentation of language, training of teachers, development of curriculum and establishment of appropriate governance structures will need to be addressed quickly.

The Indigenous language initiative must reach all ages from the youngest to the oldest. A good part of the funding should go to band schools for core and immersion language programs. Innovative ways will be needed to reach youth who attend provincial high schools and adults who are not close to a reserve.

The challenges of fulfilling the Prime Minister's promise are immense and go far beyond legislation and funding. But the payoff for Indigenous people and all Canadians will be greater still.

Don Drummond is the Stauffer-Dunning Fellow in Global Public Policy and Adjunct Professor at the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University.

To send a comment or leave feedback, email us at blog@cdhowe.org.

The views expressed here are those of the author. The C.D. Howe Institute does not take corporate positions on policy matters.