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 JAN 23 2019
 Legislative Assembly
 Members Offices

January 23rd, 2019

Dear Shane Thompson,

My name is Shene Catholique-Valpy and I am writing to you to ask for your help. I am trying to spell my daughters' names in their traditional spelling in the Chipewyan Language. I am asking Vital Statistics, which is under the Department of Health and Social Services, to recognize my language as well as the eight other Indigenous Languages, that technically are all official languages in the Northwest Territories. As of now, myself and many others are not able to use the traditional spelling because they say "it causes too many problems".

I took this issue to the Languages Commissioner in November 2014, and after many months she ruled that it should be done. This appeared to be a win for my family and the Dene of the Northwest Territories.

I have a letter from the Minister of Health and Social Services, Glen Abernethy, dated March 10, 2015, in which he agreed NWT residents may reasonably expect to be able to register their children's births using any of our official languages. He said he supported my position "absolutely", while pointing out some technical problems that would have to be overcome before the job was done.

On March 17th, 2015 the Languages Commissioner received an E-mail from Jennifer Anawak, Registrar General, stating that she agrees we should be able to use any of the official languages on our official documents because culture and languages are a priority in the Northwest Territories.

October 2nd, 2015 the Languages Commissioner released the investigation report with the recommendations and asked the Government to respond within the 30 days of release. Four months later I received a letter from Minister Abernethy explaining that they are continuing to advance their work on this file and will provide a response once they conclude their review process.

Eight months later, on October 27th 2016, I was invited to a Standing Committee presentation under the impression I was going to be given great news. Instead it was announced that the Government was going to accommodate the LGBTQ community in their request to be recognized under the Legislation. Yet at the same time the government said it was too difficult for the Dene fonts to be used on birth certificates for my children, despite the fact that the Languages Commissioner ruled it should be done. I was only invited to the Standing Committee meeting so that they could tell me that they are still working with their partners on solutions. A little disheartening for myself and my family.

This is going on the fifth year since I first made my complaint with the Languages Commissioner. Saháí?á is now almost five years old. No progress has been made that I am aware of. My family, myself, and many others are still waiting on the Government's promise. I have been told that the ordinary MLA's are the true Government and that I should ask for your support. This I am doing now, knowing that you represent many Dene, Inuvialuit, and Métis people.

October 1st, 2018 a news release announced that the GNWT is honouring the Truth and Reconciliation Calls for Action to reclaim names changed by the residential school system. This meant waiving the administrative fees for 5 years but we are still losing the meaning of the name because we have to conform to colonized spellings of our traditional names.

Our Dene fonts exist. You use them on your GNWT correspondence, including on signage across the territories in government buildings and hospitals. I am also able to type with the fonts on my keyboard at home and on my smart phone.

I am asking for more concrete answers. I would like to know when the GNWT will make good on its promise. Where does it stand? What needs to be done? What is the timeline of this process?

To sum up, I am again asking that the original citizens of this territory be granted the right to reclaim their names, reclaim their language, and reclaim the dignity of their heritage. I ask that you lobby for Aboriginal Languages by standing up and raising the issue in a member statement in support of my efforts. Allowing Dene fonts on the Northwest Territories birth certificates is a basic beginning step. Hopefully your support will encourage Cabinet to follow through on its earlier commitment. It is as easy as Saháí?á, Ná?él Nóriya.

I would like to point out that the United Nations, has declared 2019 to be the year of Indigenous Languages. Also, I would like to point out that our own territories have dedicated the month of March to Indigenous Languages. This would be a great year to have this barrier broken down, in a time when we need to be reclaiming our names and the traditional languages. Be the leader in this change, and I believe the rest of the country will follow suit.

Mahsi Cho for your support,

Sincerely yours,

Shene Catholique-Valpy

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