

29. Aboriginal Language Retention

There are eleven "language families" in Canada and at least fifty distinct aboriginal languages currently exist. Aboriginal languages other than these have already disappeared. One survey has concluded that only three of the existing fifty languages (Cree, Ojibwa and Inuktitut) have excellent chances of surviving; all others are endangered and several are considered to be on the verge of extinction. In the territories, aboriginal people constitute a significant proportion of the general population. In the Northwest Territories, they are a majority. Consequently, there has been pressure to recognize aboriginal languages as official languages of the territories. Aboriginal people who speak only their native language are now permitted to serve on juries in the Northwest Territories as a result of recent legislative amendments and translation services in nine aboriginal languages are provided to Members of the Territorial Council.

The federal government recently concluded agreements with the two territories for language retention but some aboriginal advocates believe that little is being done south of the 60th parallel. The Committee has also been told that aboriginal language issues require separate legislative treatment from "heritage language" concerns. There is currently a private Member's Bill before the House which proposes the establishment of a national aboriginal language foundation. The concerns of aboriginal people on language issues extend from the home to government services.

30. Literacy

Since 1990 is International Literacy Year, literacy issues are commanding attention at the international, national and local level. In Canada, literacy is a national concern as well as an immediate and serious problem in the aboriginal community. Literacy in English or French for aboriginal people and other Canadians has a clear connection to employment opportunities. While specific statistics on literacy in the aboriginal community are not easily available, some conception of the seriousness of the problem can be acquired simply by considering the percentage of people who have not attended high school. In 1986, the percentage of persons without any amount of high school education was very high among the aboriginal population: