



16th Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories

Standing Committee on Government Operations

Report on the Review of the
2008-2009 Annual Report of the
Languages Commissioner of the
Northwest Territories

Languages Commissioner

Chair: Mr. Kevin Menicoche

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November 1, 2010

SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Government Operations is pleased to provide its Report on the Review of the Report of the 2008-2009 Annual Report of the Languages Commissioner and commends it to the House.



Kevin Menicoche, MLA
Chairperson

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS**

**REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE
2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE
LANGUAGES COMMISSIONER**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Recommendations	2
Recommendation 1	2
Recommendation 2	2
Recommendation 3	3
Recommendation 4	3
Recommendation 5	3
Conclusion	3

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS

REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE 2008-2009 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE LANGUAGES COMMISSIONER

INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee on Government Operations (SCOGO) met on May 13, 2010, to review *The Office of the Northwest Territories Languages Commissioner Annual Report 2008-2009*. The Committee would like to thank the former Languages Commissioner, Ms. Shannon Gullberg, for preparing and presenting the report. The Committee would also like to thank the current Languages Commissioner, Ms. Sarah Jerome, for attending and participating in the review.

When the Committee reviewed the Languages Commissioner's 2007-2008 report, it expressed concern that people who speak minority languages may not be aware of the Commissioner and her role. The mandate of the Languages Commissioner is to investigate complaints, yet there had been very few complaints or inquiries. The Committee urged the recently appointed Commissioner to promote her role so that more people would bring complaints and inquiries forward to her.

In the final year of Ms. Gullberg's term as Languages Commissioner, 2008-2009, Ms. Gullberg was quite active. She visited seven communities and provided promotional packages to all teachers, health care centres and hospitals in the NWT. That was also the year the Standing Committee on Government Operations held hearings throughout the NWT as part of their review of the *Official Languages Act (OLA)*. In spite of these activities, there were no formal complaints and only 20 formal inquiries. Both Ms. Gullberg and Ms. Jerome reported that although they received telephone calls from people with questions or problems, these could not be pursued formally because there was no written follow-through. In cases like these, the Committee recommended that the Commissioner consider replacing the requirement for a written letter of complaint with some other permanent record, such as a sound recording. This could address the issue of people not making a formal complaint because they are not confident in their ability to express themselves in a written letter, or because they are intimidated by the formality of the process. The NWT has a rich oral tradition, and exploring other avenues of complaint would take this into account.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In her 2008-2009 annual report, the Commissioner made recommendations about existing issues and acknowledged some of the recommendations in the SCOGO's *Final Report on the Review of the Official Languages Act 2008-2009*.

In her role as Languages Commissioner, Ms. Gullberg initiated an investigation into the existing Aboriginal Languages Revitalization Board and the Official Languages Board. Ms. Gullberg heard that both Boards thought that the Minister Responsible for Official Languages had never responded to the recommendations made to him since their inception in 2004. However, upon writing to the Minister, Ms. Gullberg learned that there had been a response but it was unclear if any action had been taken on the recommendations. In 2006, the most recent year that the Boards made recommendations, they raised issues about board member attendance and quorum at meetings. Ms. Gullberg concluded that the Boards are looking to the Minister for assistance on administrative issues.

The Committee is disheartened to hear that both languages boards have been isolated and inactive. Notwithstanding SCOGO's report on OLA that proposes an Aboriginal Language Protection Regime that includes an Aboriginal Languages Advisory Committee, in the interim, SCOGO supports better communications and more leadership and guidance from the Minister to the Boards' membership. The Committee believes the Boards should be re-established and given assistance to understand their roles and to establish proper processes to accomplish them.

Recommendation 1

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Minister Responsible for Official Languages improve communications with the Aboriginal Languages Revitalization Board and the Official Languages Board, or any future language boards or committees; and provide written confirmation to the Boards and to the Standing Committee of departmental follow-through on the Boards' recommendations.

Recommendation 2

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Minister Responsible for Official Languages provide support to the Aboriginal Languages Revitalization Board and the Official Languages Board, or any future languages boards or committees, in regard to their roles and responsibilities and in dealing with issues internal to the Boards, such as attendance and quorum.

Ms. Gullberg supported the concept of a service-based model, as suggested in the *Final Report on the Review of the Official Languages Act 2008-2009*, to be included in the proposed *Official Languages Services Act*. The Committee's report contended that including the Aboriginal Language Protection Regime in the *Official Languages Services Act* would provide for its continued existence.

Recommendation 3

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories continue to move forward with the concept of a service-based model as suggested by the development of the proposed *Official Languages Services Act*.

In SCOGO's report on its review of the Languages Commissioner's 2007-2008 Annual Report, the Committee requested that the GNWT provide a formal, separate response to the Official Languages Commissioner's report on the state of languages in health care. Instead, the GNWT included that response within its response to the Committee report.

Recommendation 4

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends that the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a formal, separate response to *Speaking of Health: Official Languages as part of Quality Health Care in the Northwest Territories*, and that it also provide this response to the Languages Commissioner as soon as possible.

The Committee's final recommendation is as follows:

Recommendation 5

The Standing Committee on Government Operations recommends the Government of the Northwest Territories provide a comprehensive response to this report within 120 days.

CONCLUSION

The Standing Committee on Government Operations would like to thank Ms. Shannon Gullberg for her endeavours over the last five years, and her assistance in the transition of the office to Ms. Sarah Jerome.

The Committee would like to recognize Ms. Jerome's activities publicizing and promoting the role of Languages Commissioner, and is looking forward to reviewing her annual reports and to her continued attendance and participation at community events.

