

# Honouring Indigenous Languages Within Parliament

Canada has 'two official' languages, but neither one is one of the original languages of this land. As an Indigenous parliamentarian who speaks Cree, the author believed it was important to be able to make substantive statements in parliament in this language. This language informed the principle of his worldview and the worldview of some of his constituents. In 2017, the existing standing orders and policies of the House of Commons prevented his address in Cree from being translated to his fellow MPs. Despite receiving advice to use one of Canada's two official languages, the author decided to continue with his speech as planned. Subsequently, he raised a *prima facie* case that his rights as a parliamentarian had been violated and worked with the Regulations Committee (PROC) to change the standing orders. In this article, he explains his thoughts about this issue and reveals how he came to a decision to challenge the status quo in an effort to be true to himself and his people.

## Robert-Falcon Ouellette, MP

When the great mystery breathed life into creation, man and all animals were created. When this occurred, there was treaty between all living things – that they would live in a manner which recognized their mutual sacrifice and benefits. To make these treaties they communicated in a common language and were reciprocally understood; the otter could speak with the birds, the moose with fish and man with all animals. To speak and to be understood is central to treaty. It is central to the ideals of relationship.

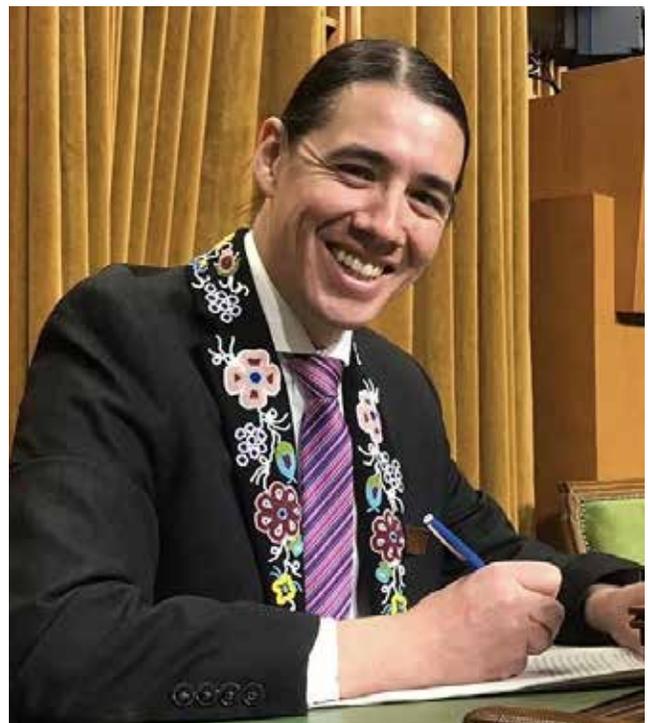
After 153 years, the Canadian House of Commons now allows for the translation of the original languages of Canada. The ability to speak a language and be understood is central to the ideals of democracy. If we speak and no one is able to understand us then we are effectively silenced and have no influence over the manner in which others impact us or the ability to influence others. There is no relationship.

*Nemacomacuntik Tansai Nemeyatanye atawapantikok.*

These words have power. These words tell a story and make a statement of values. It is a statement of worldview. A worldview is the principles of a people; it allows us to make sense of the world around us. We create a community of traditions and customs from myths, legends, stories, family, community and examples set

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*Robert-Falcon Ouellette is MP for Winnipeg Centre. He was first elected in 2015.*



**Robert-Falcon Ouellette before his speech on January 28, 2019.**

by communal leaders. A worldview allows a people who self-identify to create a system of logic; it allows objects to fit within a paradigm, generates behaviour and helps a people to interpret their experiences. I start almost all my speeches in parliament and in front of large crowds with this simple phrase.

When I was first elected in 2015 I had a number of objectives; a vision of what I would do as an MP. I wanted to make a difference, to improve the lives of my fellow citizens of Winnipeg, to have influence. I also knew that I did not want to be catalogued as ‘just that Indigenous guy’ or ‘just that Indigenous MP.’ I thought long and hard about where and how I could best have influence. I asked and was placed on the finance committee. I wanted to advocate for all my fellow citizens in Parliament, to be their voice. Not all the citizens in Winnipeg Centre are Indigenous. We have Filipino people, Muslims, environmentalists, Mennonites, the homeless, poor people, the middle class, activists and, yes, also Indigenous peoples.

This is my baggage. It was also the path to using my language, the Cree language in Parliament. In 2017 there was violence in a number of Indigenous communities against Indigenous girls, and young women. I felt that since I was a leader I needed to take a stand against this violence and address the violence in a manner that would be noticed. The only problem was that we often hear from the political class that society should stop violence, and among Indigenous peoples, stop the lateral violence among our peoples. Elders, teachers, politicians, and activists will frequently say ‘No to the violence’, yet the violence continues.

I felt the way to reach young people would be to do a speech in Cree, talk about the violence and our need to be kind to each other, and renew our treaty within our communities. I prepared my text, including an English version. I called the Whips office and arranged a moment to give the speech during Member’s Statements before Question Period.

I was surprised to learn that even though I had given the parliamentary interpretation services ample warning and provided an English version of my text there would be no interpretation services offered. The standing orders and existing policies did not permit the use of another language in the House of Commons. I would be required to give my speech in English or in French; I would need to use one of Canada’s two ‘official’ languages. The staff from the Whip’s office contacted me and asked that I use English or French; my staff asked that I use English or French. I feel I was asked to use English and French because people were afraid of what the reaction might be. I was told that the Speaker would not allow me to finish my speech, as it was against the rules. I was told that the opposition would use this incident to play games in Parliament to upset the government. I was told to speak white.

On the night of May 3, 2017, I lay awake in my apartment thinking about what I should do. I thought about the possible consequences of going against the wishes of the Whip’s office. I had already been punished with curtailed speaking rights in the House and no travel with parliamentary committees in the previous year for trying to represent my citizens. By the morning, I prayed, smudged, conducted a pipe ceremony and I thought about the words of an Elder named George who said to me when I was running for office that ‘My words are my honour and my words are the people.’

On May 4, 2017 I started giving my speech in Cree, I said:

anohcihkî nîswâw âcimowina kipêhtênaw  
ita oskâya-iyiniw-iskwêwak ê-nipahihck  
âhpô ê-kî-sôhki-wîsakatahohcik. êkosi  
kî-itahkamikan mêkwâc ayisiyiniwak  
ê-kanawâpahkêcik mîna ê-masinipihcikêcik.  
êkosi tâpitaw kâ-âh-ispayik. kita-  
nâkatawêyihmahk piko kâ-âh-isi-  
pamihitoyahk, kiyânaw ayisiyiniw kâ-  
ititoyahk. niya niwîcîkâpawîstên ôma  
môswa-ayân atoskâtamâkêwin (**Moose  
Hide Campaign**) êkwa ispayin ta-  
wihtamahk ôma kah-kitimâkêhikiwina,  
ta-kistêyimâyahkî kahkiyaw iskwêwak.  
nikâwîsak, nisikosak, nitawêmâwak, nitânis,  
mîna nitôtêmak miyosiwak; sôhkitêhêwak,  
tah-tapêyimisowak, sâkihiwêwak,  
kistêyimowak, tâpweyihkâkosiwak, sôhki-  
atoskêwak. kitakî-manâcihihcik, kitakî-  
manâcihikocik oyasiwêwin, êkosi namôya  
sêmâk kita-kitimahihcik, namôya sêmâk ka-  
nisiwanâcihihcik.

Recently in the Prairies, two high profile violent events occurred where young indigenous women were killed and severely hurt. These events occurred while people stood by and recorded these incidents. The freedom of the violence calls into question our own humanity. I am a supporter of the Moose Hide Campaign and it is time that we raise indigenous women above our current beliefs. My aunts, cousins, daughter, and friends are beautiful. They are courageous, humble, intelligent, loving, respectful, honest, hard-working. They deserve additional protection of our laws so people think twice before they destroy lives.

It was one of the hardest moments in my life. I would leave the translation and interpretation up to the creator; I had no control over others, only my actions. As I gave my speech in Cree I could hear my fellow MPs laughing. They were expecting a speech in English or French, so they were naturally wondering what I was talking about. It was a very serious topic and it deserved attention. After I spoke, I was asked by my good colleagues what I had said, as no one had understood. I questioned later if I had actually spoken; if the words which left my mouth really mattered. I was upset because the people of Winnipeg Centre and Indigenous peoples from across Canada had not sent me to Ottawa to be silent, but rather to ensure a different voice was heard and to present a different worldview. I had been silenced by the institution.

Later as I went about my weekend, my anger grew towards the injustice. Other Elders had previously asked me to ensure that our ceremonies would be in the House of Commons, that our drum would be heard. Yet my voice had been silenced. I felt that my parliamentary privileges had been ignored and trampled upon. I decided this needed to change, but I needed to use the institution and make a point of privilege. I went to see the Chief of Staff for the Whip, who then sent me to the House Leader's office. They preferred that I would not make my point of privilege as they were having difficult negotiations on legislation and they were afraid it would derail important government legislation. Every few days I would return and ask when I could make my point. It should be remembered that points of privilege must be made as soon as possible, closest to the moment when a violation occurred. I persisted and I kept asking and eventually, on June 8, 2017, I was told I could make my case of *prima facie*. It was almost a month later.

The institution of Parliament is formidable. Individual MPs have very little weight; you must fight to be heard. It is stressful because of the multiple roadblocks placed in your path. Even the simple act of smudging in my office has been a difficult effort; there have been many back-and-forths between the Chief Fire Warden and me. It is hard to be an MP and it is particularly hard to be an Indigenous MP. There are great expectations placed on your shoulders and you are placed within a large institution which has its own worldview. It can consume you. This battle in the House of Commons was a basic human rights fight. It is harder than you think to battle every day on a physical and emotional level. Yet, here I am, and here the House of Commons still stands. The institution has grown in stature through the effort of reconciliation of worldviews.



Amelie Cheng

**Ouellette with Kevin Lewis, a professor at the University of Saskatchewan and the First Indigenous translator in Parliament.**

When translation was eventually permitted for the first time on January 28, 2019, I said in the media: "This is something I've been fighting for now for two years almost, and to have the opportunity of having Indigenous languages translated I think is a significant and very symbolic and important measure [towards] including Indigenous Canadians; to tell Indigenous Canadians that they are full citizens."

The rest is now part of the history of Canada. This case led to a study by the Regulations (PROC) Committee and the hard work by colleagues on all sides to change the standing orders. It was not a battle that I undertook alone. I would like to thank David Graham, a Jewish MP from Quebec who never let the committee stop the important work it was doing and MP Chris Bittle who pushed our House Leader to ensure that parliamentary procedure was respected and that the standing orders were changed. A great thank you to Professor Karen Drake for the arguments and writings which allowed the case of *prima facie* to be made. On a personal note, this has been a very proud moment in my life, but also my most difficult. It is extremely stressful, pushing against large institutions, feeling alone, and being the point of the arrow.