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Cherokee Identity, National Responsibility, and Global Solidarity: A Tribal Leadership View of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr.*

Siyo nigad.

Again, welcome to the Cherokee Nation. I think it's appropriate to recognize the gentleman who just introduced me. He is the former chief of the Cherokee Nation, currently our special envoy for international affairs and language preservation. I want you to think about this. His service to the Cherokee people has touched the last five decades of our existence.

Think about that for a moment. When I was a young man, I saw Chief Joe Byrd take office and speak the Cherokee language here in Tahlequah and on a national stage. You can imagine what that did for a young man with an interest in public service someday, like I had. So, think about his decades of service; think about the fact that he was speaking to a national and international audience in our language long before there was a decade of Indigenous languages.

Let's once again recognize former Chief Byrd for his contributions to this great effort. It is my distinct honor to help open the International

* Chuck Hoskin Jr. serves as the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, the largest tribe in the United States with over 450,000 citizens. Prior to election in 2019, Hoskin was Cherokee Nation's Secretary of State and also served as a member of the Council of the Cherokee Nation.

Decade of Indigenous Languages. I'm proud of the work to revitalize our language in which we are engaged here at the Cherokee Nation. We have a language department that, in my estimation, is the best in the field.

We are using the best strategies for language preservation at our Cherokee Immersion School. We are opening a second immersion school campus and expanding our Master Apprentice Language Program to develop opportunities for our new speakers. That includes the creative arts, teaching and many other great fields. We're directing our attention to the future. We're working with tech companies in using technology so that a new generation of language-learners finds our language accessible, and so that people anywhere in the world can access the beautiful Cherokee language.

We are directing more of our nation's resources for housing, for health care, and for safety net services towards our fluent speakers because we know this daunting fact: We have 2,000 fluent speakers left. Most of them are elders, and many of them are not meeting a standard of living that we would want. We know that the greatest enemies of the Cherokee language right now are the passage of time and the fragility of human life.

Part of our language preservation strategy is, frankly, to take care of our fluent speakers. If we expect our elders to help us save the Cherokee language, if we expect them to be there for us, then we have got to be there for them. Deputy Chief Bryan Warner, the Council of the Cherokee Nation and I worked together on a piece of legislation known as the Durbin Feeling Language Preservation Act of 2019.

We injected over \$15 million towards the cause of language preservation. We can expand all of those programs that I talked about, we can develop new language efforts, and we can create a new home for all Cherokee language programs. We've named it the Durbin Feeling Language Center after Durbin Feeling. I hope you get a chance to see that facility as it's under construction as we speak.

I think a lot about Durbin Feeling as we go about the business of language preservation and what he did for that cause, not only in the Cherokee Nation but across the United States, and indeed, around the world. I wish for so many reasons that Durbin Feeling were still here. Not the least of which, though, is that I wish he were here to witness the launch of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages.

Here is what I believe Durbin would ask each of us from our respective tribal lands, all around the world, all across the country, and here at the Cherokee Nation. I think Durbin Feeling would say this: If we are going to launch a decade dedicated to the preservation and the revitalization of Indigenous languages, then let's set a real goal. Let's make sure that by the end of this decade all of us are creating and inspiring more speakers.

That's my challenge to each of you. Let's create more speakers than we're losing by the end of this decade, and let's make this decade something worthwhile. Let me close with a few additional thoughts. I know you have a great deal of work to do. I want you to know you have my admiration and respect for the work that you're undertaking.

But as we go about this work, as we go about making historic investments to save the Cherokee language, and as we undertake this international effort, the first of its kind to preserve Indigenous languages around the world, we would do well to ask ourselves: Why are we doing it in the first place? Why are these efforts so important? Why are these efforts and the goal of language preservation something that should command the world's attention and something that should demand our success here in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, and across the globe?

I think there are at least two reasons.

First of all, for Native peoples, no matter where we are in our development personally on the language, our language is our identity as Native peoples and our identity is everything.

The advancements that we achieve in all of the other areas — all the other endeavors that Indian nations and tribal people and Indigenous people engage in, all of the achievements that we make, all the progress that we make, whether it's now or generations from now — lose their meaning if we lose our identity. And if we lose our language, we will have lost so much of our identity.

Cherokee Nation might continue to lead in areas such as health care, addressing problems of poverty, addressing issues in education, building up strong businesses. But none of that is really tied to our identity. Language is what makes us unique. It's the chain that links us to our past.

It's what binds us together today. And if that chain is unbroken, it is what links us to the future.

Whether it links us to the future, though, depends on whether that chain is unbroken, whether it remains strong. Nothing is more important to the Cherokee Nation than keeping that chain from breaking so that generations from now we're not just a great Indian nation with great businesses that tackles problems of poverty and education and housing and health care.

But we are an Indian nation that has a unique identity, and that's what Indigenous peoples around the world want. They want to keep that intact. That alone is a reason for people to get behind your efforts.

I think the second reason, though, is more global in scope. The world has to recognize the most prosperous nations of this world, and particularly the United States, which has yet to develop a comprehensive plan to get behind the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. It's wrong, and the United States ought to do better.

But the nations of the world, particularly the most prosperous nations of this world, the nations that have grown wealthy over the last few centuries, need to recognize that the so-called age of discovery, colonization, generations of policies that were designed to exterminate Indigenous peoples or policies that simply failed Indigenous peoples, that those came at a steep cost to Indigenous languages.

Humanity has a collective responsibility for this damage that was done to Indigenous peoples. All of us have that responsibility. To rob a people of their language is to destroy a people's identity. Humanity suffers, not just the Indigenous peoples, but I think all of humanity suffers when a language is exterminated.

Yes, it damages those distinct people who called that language theirs. But I think it has a corrosive effect on all of mankind when we do that kind of injury to each other. We know that destroying Indigenous languages has been the work of nations, and we've got to insist that rebuilding Indigenous languages also has to be the work of nations.

What is at the heart of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages is that reconciliation, that healing, that's important to all

mankind. I think that if we're successful in our efforts, we will do a great deal to restore the languages of Indigenous peoples around the world. But I also think that if we are successful over the course of the next decade, we will bring healing in a very meaningful way to a world that is sorely in need of it.

I wish you all the best. I am so grateful that you're here in the great Cherokee Nation to undertake this incredibly vital mission.

Thank you all very much.

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