“I was angry at my grandparents for a long time.”

Onowa McIvor grew up in northern Saskatchewan, where her grandparents feared prejudice against Indigenous peoples and did everything they could to bury their Cree roots. They refused to teach the language to their children and grandchildren. McIvor felt robbed of her heritage.

As McIvor learned more about the history of residential schools, and the discrimination Indigenous peoples faced, she understood the fear that drove them. Now, as Director of Indigenous Education at the University of Victoria, she works to revitalize Canada's Indigenous tongues. As Canadians mark 150 years since Confederation and reflect on our complicated history, it's a goal all Canadians should share.

“If you are Canadian, Indigenous languages are part of your heritage, and it should matter to you if they survive,” says McIvor.

Language trees like Algonquian, Athapaskan, and Inuktitut drove their roots into this country millennia before a word of English or French was spoken here. Today, there are more than 60 distinct Indigenous languages in Canada. Tens of thousands still speak Cree, Ojibwe and Inuktitut. Other languages are on the brink of extinction. The 2011 census (the most recent data available) recorded just 545 Mohawk speakers in all of Canada.

“Some of our languages are sleeping and we have to wake them up,” says Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations.

Bellegarde tells us that working with Canadian governments to deliver that wake-up call is one of his top priorities. Supporting Indigenous language was one of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In December, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised to introduce an Indigenous Languages Act. Bellegarde hopes Trudeau keeps this promise, and that the bill includes measures like creating a national Indigenous Languages Commissioner, and more financial resources for language education.

But it's not just Indigenous peoples who would benefit from learning these languages. Teaching non-Indigenous Canadians would build bridges. Bellegarde recently visited a Grade 4 class in North Bay, Ontario, where all 15 students—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—were able to greet him in perfect Ojibwe. They're part of an Indigenous second language program offered by the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic School Board at four of its schools. For students at the University of Winnipeg, who must have at least one credit in Indigenous studies to graduate, options include learning Cree or Ojibwe.

“[Learning our languages] is the greatest act and form of reconciliation,” says Bellegarde.

Cities can do their part through small acts like making street signs bilingual, pairing English or French with the language of the nation in whose territory the community resides.

McIvor has another, more radical, proposal: making Indigenous tongues official languages of Canada.

It would be near impossible, economically and logistically, to offer all government services in 60-plus Indigenous languages across Canada. McIvor believes it would be feasible if approached regionally—providing relevant services in the language that is predominant in particular areas. Translating web sites and documents, and staffing Service Canada locations and call centres could also create jobs for Indigenous communities.

We must remember the foundation of our country was laid much earlier than 150 years ago, by people speaking many different tongues.