

SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
Senator Thomas Umberg, Chair
2023-2024 Regular Session

AB 2287 (Chen)
Version: February 8, 2024
Hearing Date: June 11, 2024
Fiscal: No
Urgency: No
ME

SUBJECT

Inuit

DIGEST

This bill changes the use of words in various code sections that are used to reference specified Native Americans with the accurate words “Inuk” and “Inuit” instead.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the U.S. Census, the American Indian and Alaska Native population for California was 723,225 in 2010.¹ And, of “all respondents who identified as American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination with another race, California had the largest percentage (14 percent).”

California has a sinister history of using the power of the government against the first people of this state in an attempt to eradicate the native people of California. For example, California Governors authorized twenty-four separate state militias and raised \$1.5 million for Indian hunting militia operations.² California’s first Governor Peter Burnett, declared that “a war of extermination will continue to be waged until the Indian race becomes extinct.”

Given this history, it is not surprising that offensive words are used throughout the statutes to describe a particular group of Native Americans. What is surprising is that in 2024 these words persist in California’s statutes. This bill changes the use of these offensive words to instead reflect the word “Inuk” and “Inuit” to describe this group of Native Americans.

¹ *The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2010*, 2010 Census Briefs, Issued Jan. 2012, Tina Norris, Paula L. Vines, Elizabeth M. Hoeffel, available at <<https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf>> as of [as of 6/2/24].

² *All That Glitters? Legacies of the California Gold Rush*, Backstory (Jan. 19, 2018) #0229, available at <<https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/gold-rush/>> [as of 6/2/24].

This bill is author sponsored. The Committee has received no timely support or opposition to the bill.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE LAW

Existing law uses inaccurate terms throughout various code sections to describe the Inuit people. (Gov. Code §§ 8880.56, 14839, 14840; Pub. Con. Code §§ 2000, 2051, 1011.4.1; Streets & Highways Code § 94.4.)

This bill replaces terms in various code sections that are used to reference specified Native Americans with “Inuk” and “Inuit” instead.

COMMENTS

1. Author statement

According to the author:

By ending the usage of an outdated, offensive term in California law, AB 2287 raises awareness of the discriminatory struggles Arctic natives have and continue to face. Something as simple as a word change would declare California’s respect for Arctic natives, as well as place an emphasis on the importance of educating oneself and others on the history of disenfranchised groups. Given the recent discovery of mass graves of Inuit children in Canada as a result of genocide committed by residential schools, AB 2287 is all the more relevant and necessary to validate the deep-rooted plight of Inuit. The fact that “Eskimo” is still present in California legal code today is unfortunate, but this bill declares our willingness to learn and repair our mistakes.

2. Inuit is the plural word for Inuk and is the more accurate way to describe a particular group of Native American people

As explained in the Assembly Judiciary Committee analysis of this bill:

A brief etymological history of the term “Eskimo.” As with several other instances of previously-common phrases, the term “Eskimo” has a fraught past. Typically used to refer to Native populations in Alaska, Canada and various other Arctic regions, it is largely understood to have Algonquian roots and was originally thought to mean “eaters of raw meat.” (Zach Parrot, *Eskimo*, The Canadian Encyclopedia, Published August 5, 2008, edited June 9, 2021 available at:

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/eskimo#:~:text=Inuit%20is%20the%20standard%20endonym,while%20also%20romanticizing%20the%20Arctic.>) However, as the Algonquian language has numerous dialects and reflects linguistic influences, such as Cree and Ojibwe, there appear to be

conflicting conclusions over the definition of term. Another approach seems to translate the term into “one who laces snowshoes,” stemming from the French word “esquimaux.” (Rebecca Hersher, *Why You Probably Shouldn't Say 'Eskimo'*, National Public Radio (Apr. 24, 2016 available at: [https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/04/24/475129558/why-you-probably-shouldnt-say-eskimo.](https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/04/24/475129558/why-you-probably-shouldnt-say-eskimo)) Regardless of the origin of the term and its earliest meaning, it has since developed into both a pejorative and inaccurate word.

The term “Eskimo” was imposed by non-Inuit to describe an Alaska Native population that lived, and continues to live, in parts of the world known for their cold climates and remote landscapes. Thus, as it is often employed, the term has come to denote a remote and isolated population, far from “civilization.” Additionally, one of the two potential original meanings of the term, “eaters of raw meat,” imposes a sense of barbarity and savagery that commonly is used to disparage Native peoples throughout the development of both modern-day United States and Canada. Moreover, the term “Eskimo” is an exonym, or term imposed by those outside a given population to describe that group. The population the term intends to capture more commonly refer to themselves as “Inuit,” meaning “people,” or the singular “Inuk” meaning “person.” (*Ibid.*) [. . .]

3. California funded and sanctioned the genocide of Native Americans

California has a sinister history of using the power of the government against the first people of this state in an attempt to destroy the native people of California. As just one example, California Governors authorized twenty-four separate state militias and raised \$1.5 million for Indian hunting militia operations.³ California’s first Governor Peter Burnett, declared that “a war of extermination will continue to be waged until the Indian race becomes extinct.” According to UCLA Associate Professor Benjamin Madley:

The near annihilation of California’s Indian population [. . .] was actually a case of genocide, sanctioned, paid for, and facilitated by state and federal officials. For example, in 1852, California’s US Senator John Weller, who later became the State’s Governor in 1858 told his colleagues in the United States Senate that the California Indians, and I quote, “will be exterminated before the onward march of the white man.” And, he insisted that the interest of the white man demands their extinction. [. . .] California politicians knew from the beginning that the federal government would reimburse them for money they had expended on killing Indian people. [. . .] What has changed very recently was that the

³ *All That Glitters? Legacies of the California Gold Rush*, Backstory (Jan. 19, 2018) #0229, available at <https://www.backstoryradio.org/shows/gold-rush/> [as of 6/2/24].

Governor of California, Jerry Brown, acknowledged that what happened in California was in his words, an actual genocide."⁴

SUPPORT

None received

OPPOSITION

None received

RELATED LEGISLATION

Pending Legislation: None known.

Prior Legislation: None known.

PRIOR VOTES:

Assembly Floor (Ayes 72, Noes 0)
Assembly Judiciary Committee (Ayes 12, Noes 0)

⁴ *Id.*