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The Secretary
House of Representatives ATSIA Committee
R1 106, PO Box 6021
Parliament House, ACT 2600

Submission

**To the Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
Inquiry into language learning in Indigenous communities**

From the Koori Centre, University of Sydney

Authorised by the Director, Ms Janet Mooney.

We respond to the terms of reference of the inquiry as follows:

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

Whether viewed on the basis of social justice, human rights, respect for culture, self-esteem, self-determination, community capacity-building, education, cognitive development, health and well-being or national reconciliation, we believe the benefits of giving attention to and recognising Indigenous Australian languages to be axiomatic and parallel to the benefits of giving attention and recognition to Australian English. They have also recently been substantially commented on in the National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005¹ and the Social Justice Report 2009².

¹ Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2005) Chapter 2 Language endangerment, in *National Indigenous languages survey report 2005: Report submitted to the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in association with the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages* <http://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/nils-report-2005.pdf>

² Australian Human Rights Commission (2009) Chapter 3: The perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia, in *Social Justice Report 2009* http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport09/chap3.html



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To continue to seek such validation is an unproductive distraction, particularly when the ongoing loss of Indigenous languages is a national cultural emergency. Australia needs to move forward in this urgent issue, not remain locked in a loop of inaction. By giving substantial attention and recognition we may yet be able to save some of them, rather than remaining on track to be the world's worst steward of Indigenous cultural heritage.

The contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture

Indigenous languages have been likened to the DNA of pre-contact Indigenous Australian cultures and continue to be the primary vehicle of transmission for many. Even for those who no longer speak them they are iconic markers of Indigenous identity. They do not merely strengthen Indigenous culture and identity; they are core components of it and should be valued and supported for that reason. Their restoration to communities that have been deprived of them would provide some restitution that permitted reconnection and healing, and enhance cultural pride and self-esteem. They should not be permitted to suffer further loss.

The neglect and historical repression of Indigenous Australian languages has been a core component in creating the gap the Government now seeks to close. By largely providing English-only schooling to children who do not speak it and live in non-English-speaking communities, various governments over the last 200 years have directly overseen the inadequate education of generations of Indigenous Australians. They have effectively ensured that people fail to acquire fully functional versions of either their own language or English thus confounding their educability for life.

If the Government wishes to use education to close the gap it should act to ensure high quality mother tongue education is provided to those children who enter with English as a second language. If children receive a good primary education in a language they understand, they will acquire literacy and numeracy and an understanding of school processes that will allow them to subsequently acquire English as a second language sufficient to function satisfactorily in the world they occupy.

The potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education

For Indigenous Australian children who speak English as a second language, if at all, the provision of education in the language of their home is a fundamental right³ and will have substantial linguistic, cognitive, educational and social benefits in comparison to enforced

³ United Nations (2007) *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html>

education in a foreign language; English. Like English-speaking children in English-speaking communities, they will only need to master the content of the curriculum and behaviours of formal schooling. They will not be disadvantaged by having to try and overcome the barrier of a foreign language as well.

Compulsory education in a foreign language that is largely not spoken in the home or local community is only likely to ensure children do not achieve mastery of either language and are cognitively, educationally and socially disadvantaged as a result. This reflects the failure of most government education for remote area Indigenous Australian children to date.

Discrete English as a Second Language classes within an otherwise Indigenous language-speaking school would not be harmful per se, but could also not realistically be expected to produce students whose English was comparable to that of broader Australian society. It is not school that determines the language children speak in their daily lives, it is the language of their environment.

For those communities currently undergoing language shift under stress from English, early interventions such as language nests are necessary to arrest the disruption of intergenerational transmission and consequent language loss. However, to ensure the survival of those languages, primary education in them, at worst in a parallel maintenance (i.e. not transitional) bilingual model, is also essential to prevent loss simply being postponed.

For students whose first language is English, education using an Indigenous Australian language as the medium of instruction would be counter-productive, in exactly the same way that English only education has been for non-English-speaking ones. However, learning their own language *as a second language* within the school environment would not only be unharmed, it would fulfil the language requirement of most state syllabi, enhance the cognitive development of children and help restore pride and self-esteem across the community.

Measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language

In communities where English is a second language, if used at all, children need to be educated in the language they bring to the school. Attempting to teach them using a language they do not speak as a medium of instruction, and while they are still in the process of acquiring their first language, will only continue to have the devastatingly negative effects on their acquisition of both languages and education that it has done for decades. It is linguistically and educationally indefensible. Non-Indigenous Australians would not tolerate classroom teachers teaching their children in a foreign language all



day, but Indigenous Australians are expected to, and then blamed for the predictably poor outcomes.

Non-English-speaking Aboriginal children are perfectly capable of acquiring school behaviour, literacy, numeracy and a good primary education, if it is delivered to them by trained teachers who speak their language. The documented success of bilingual education in the Northern Territory has demonstrated this when children have been assessed appropriately in their own language, rather than being unfairly subject to foreign (English) language tests such as NAPLAN.^{4 5}

The language of instruction in remote schools should not be determined by the pool of available teachers. Investment in comprehensive training for Aboriginal language-speaking teachers is required. If the learning of English is to be a priority for those communities, it will most economically and successfully be implemented in English as Second Language programs in post-primary education, once children have successfully mastered full functional capacity in their own language. There is no advantage for the acquisition of English to require it earlier, and only harm to be achieved by disrupting acquisition of their first language.

The educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities

Where English is the language of the Indigenous community, English language proficiency would be of obvious benefit, its enhancement it is a feasible goal of education. Where the variety of the community is Aboriginal English, a bi-dialectal approach in school is warranted and some English as a Second Language expertise amongst teachers would clearly be helpful – although it must be recognised that school will ultimately not change the speech habits of the community.

However, if a community is essentially non-English-speaking, enforced English proficiency will be of little value and, in fact, counterproductive. Children who are forced to

⁴ Devlin, B. (2009). *Bilingual education in the NT and the continuing debate over its effectiveness and value*. Paper presented to the AITSSIS Research Symposium, Canberra, June 26, 2009.
http://abc.net.au/4corners/special_ed/20090914/language/docs/Devlin_paper.pdf

⁵ Simpson, J., Caffery, J. & McConvell, P. (2009) *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous language policy: dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory*. AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper No.24
<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/docs/dp/DP24.pdf>

learn English in the school but have no other use for it in their daily life will not acquire English to a functionally adequate level to participate successfully in an English-only world. Acquisition of their first language will also be put at high risk, potentially ensuring neither language is acquired to functionally sophisticated levels. As a consequence their general education will be poor. This has been the history of education for most Indigenous Australians in remote areas to date.

As the chair of the Committee has noted, “There seems to be a belief in Australia that we are a monolingual nation and that only Standard Australian English can benefit a person, both educationally and vocationally.”⁶ The assertion that English proficiency will ensure good educational and employment outcomes is patently false for the vast majority of remote area Indigenous Australians. It is only for the small minority who elect to abandon their community that English represents a potentially useful skill for social functions and employment. Continuing on this path also incentivises the abandonment of communities by young people whose movement to larger centres is ultimately rarely rewarded with employment but results in a disrupted social profile in their homeland, in addition to the critically evident social problems suffered and caused by itinerant populations in regional centres.

It would be far more appropriate to provide training in skills relevant to the needs of communities in the language of the community, and within that community. Rather than continuing to waste funds on the recruitment, relocation and housing of English-speaking outsiders (who often cannot communicate effectively with the community, have high turnover rates and are not genuinely competitively selected), it would be more productive and consistent with the philosophy of self-determination to provide local residents with the skills and knowledge required to serve their own people. They will, after all, remain there providing continuity and development of service delivery over time, and not need to bridge a cultural divide on a daily basis in order to do their job.

If schools teach in the language the community speaks there will be a significant need to employ local language speakers in the classroom and producing materials for it, as was the case in the NT bilingual programs until they were effectively dismantled.^{7 8} If fluency

⁶ Parliament of Australia, House of Representatives, House Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (8 July, 2011) *Language learning in Indigenous communities*. Media alert.

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/atsia/languages/media/media01.pdf>

⁷ Devlin, B. (2009). *Bilingual education in the NT and the continuing debate over its effectiveness and value*. Paper presented to the AITIS Research Symposium, Canberra, June 26, 2009.

http://abc.net.au/4corners/special_eds/20090914/language/docs/Devlin_paper.pdf

in the local language (i.e. the ability to communicate successfully with clients) is made an essential requirement for employment in these communities it will not only create preferential opportunities for local people, but give status to the language and incentivise its maintenance. Remote area Indigenous people need to be the ones employed to serve their own communities. Beyond some administratively heavy roles that require communication with government and other outside agencies, speaking standard Australian English is not a particularly useful skill on the ground in remote communities. Local knowledge, local connections and local language are much more pertinent to being effective.

The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages

Although there is a good deal of maintenance and revitalisation effort taking place around the country, except in those regions served by well-managed community language centres or other expert teams, much of it lacks coordination, planning and a sound basis in linguistic theory. This carries a high risk of wasted effort and resources in what is, essentially, an emergency. While Indigenous community involvement in and, indeed, control over what happens to their languages is critical if either maintenance or revitalisation efforts are to be successful, so is the capacity to assess the viability and usefulness of programs against what has gone before, what is known to work and what is clearly known not to.⁹ And if revitalisation theory and good practice must be re-discovered by each newcomer to the field, we will sadly be doomed to failure.

The establishment of a national Indigenous languages centre that could provide oversight and maintain the development of activity in the field over time, coordinate and provide training and planning support, balance the interest of communities, linguists and government, and provide national leadership would be of great value in this regard, as would the seeding of a network of regional language centres in areas where they do not currently exist. Ongoing support of existing centres should also be substantially increased, including granting them tax-deductible status.

⁸ Simpson, J., Caffery, J. & McConvell, P. (2009) *Gaps in Australia's Indigenous language policy: dismantling bilingual education in the Northern Territory*. AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper No.24
<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research/docs/dp/DP24.pdf>

⁹ Walsh, M. (2010). Why language revitalization sometimes works, in J. Hobson, K. Lowe, S. Poetsch and M. Walsh (eds), *Re-Awakening languages: Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.



There is also a need for a re-balancing of the documentation and revitalisation mix. At this stage the emphasis is still heavily in favour of documentation which seeks to preserve languages in archives, but does not necessarily contribute to the maintenance of spoken languages or their revitalisation. Rather than mainly bank against future loss we should be strongly supporting revival and continuity of daily use. Vital spoken languages do not need to be documented in order to persist.

In this regard the implementation of such proven strategies as language nests and master-apprentice schemes should be a high priority. The teaching of Indigenous languages (as second languages) in schools helps to keep them alive and should continue to be supported. But it also risks reducing them to living only in schools, restricted to school topics, and with little prospect of restoration as languages of the home. To maintain or revitalise languages in families and communities requires activity to be supported in those same fora, outside schools.

The effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives and relevant policies of other Australian governments

The effectiveness of the current Commonwealth Indigenous languages policy is likely to be poor at best if it is to be measured against the criterion of addressing language loss in Indigenous communities. The following enhancements are recommended:

A national Indigenous languages centre should not be the subject of a feasibility study. It is perfectly feasible and urgently needed. Action should be taken to establish one as a priority.

Supporting greater coordination and assistance amongst Indigenous language centres to maximise their impact nationally and to reach languages not currently supported should be a core goal for such a centre.

Funding under the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program should be substantially increased and given the priority of maintaining and restoring languages in spoken use, rather than adding to archives. The re-announcement of MILR funds under the current policy is disappointing in this regard.

The use of new technology may broaden the impact of language maintenance and revival activities by local community Indigenous language centres. However, it is often not cost effective, rapidly superseded and inherently problematic for remote communities, frequently consuming scarce funds in payments to external service providers. An emphasis on projects that use new technology to directly maintain or re-establish opportunities for people to speak their languages to each other should be added.

Language nests are already proven as a strategy to maintain and revitalise languages. A broad program to implement them is required, as is the implementation of a national master-apprentice scheme to maintain oral use of those languages in danger of immediate loss. In the absence of access to language centres, mobile language teams at least offer some hope to remote communities and are likely to be of much greater benefit than continued neglect.

Tax-deductible status for Indigenous languages organisations should not just be considered; it should be granted as soon as possible to allow for a philanthropic funding stream to supplement the need for government funds.

The actions to support and develop interpreting and translating services are applauded to the extent that they have been implemented to date.

The support of Indigenous (second) language programs in school is applauded as a means to preserve them, in an albeit socially limited form. However, it must be noted that second language school programs will not ensure the maintenance or revitalisation of Indigenous languages as spoken languages in any community.

The Government's stated support of Indigenous language learning in bilingual schools is applauded. Its apparently contradictory support for the effective dismantling of bilingual education in the NT is therefore doubly disappointing. If there is a genuine interest in fostering better education, literacy and numeracy for remote area Indigenous children, the restoration and substantial expansion of bilingual education is urgently needed.

The learning of English is only "... a fundamental skill that all Australians, including Indigenous Australians, must have in order to maximise their learning opportunities and life chances" *if they continue to be denied both the right to receive education and conduct their lives in their own language* should they choose. If Indigenous Australians are provided with quality education in their own languages, and have the advantage of speaking their own language preferred for those employment opportunities that exist in their communities, their English proficiency will be largely irrelevant. In any event, the vast majority of Indigenous people, even in the most remote areas, already speak the variety of English that exists in their community. No amount of education or policy will cause them to speak a variety with which they have no other contact.

The inclusion of Australian languages in the national curriculum should be a high priority. Fostering the opportunity for all Australians to develop some competence in the Indigenous languages of this country can only add to their capacity to understand.



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