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Inquiry into the Needs of Metropolitan and Urban Dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

### **A Submission on Aboriginal English and Urban Dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People**

Aboriginal English is a dialect of English which is widely spoken by Indigenous Australians, and which differs from Australian English in pronunciation, vocabulary, idiom and in the ways in which it is used. To most Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal English provides a link geographically with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the continent, as well as a link historically with Indigenous people of former generations. Unlike Indigenous languages, Aboriginal English is strongly present among urban and metropolitan Indigenous people as well as among those living in more remote areas.

Until recently, it has been common for people to refer to Aboriginal English in a derogatory way, whether as a “broken” or “distorted” form of the kind of English people regard as standard, or as a pidgin which does not have the status of a full language. Since the 1960s a series of linguistic studies in all states of Australia have confirmed that Aboriginal English (with certain local variations) is a consistent dialect spoken across the nation. It is different from Australian English, but it is an equally rich linguistic variety.

In fact, from the time of European settlement in Australia, English has become Australianized in two speech communities: the European and the Indigenous communities. As English speakers made Australia their home, a form of English developed here which reflected the Australian context and the way of life of shared by those living here. Australian English developed historically out of the shared experience of the generations of Australians who lived here. In time, it came to be an identifier of Australians and a valued mark of their identity. The experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was different. They came to speak English against a background of a longstanding identity in this country which had found linguistic expression in other languages. Aboriginal English started from an Indigenous base, with respect to its sounds and meanings, although it used English words and, for the most part, English grammar. From the earliest days of European settlement until now, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have only partly shared in one another’s history. Just as their history as inhabitants of Australia has been distinctive, so has their English.

English, then, carries a dual identity for Aboriginal people. As Australian English it carries an identity as Australians shared with the wider community, but as Aboriginal English it carries an identity shared only with other Indigenous people. To non-indigenous Australians, English means just one English: Australian English. To Indigenous Australians, English means the inheritance they have from their Indigenous speech community (Aboriginal English) as well as that which they share (to a greater or lesser extent) with the wider community. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people then, operate in a bicultural world and negotiate their identity within that world with two Englishes. It is unacceptable in Indigenous contexts to speak the same way as one does in the non-Indigenous context. Australian English in Indigenous contexts does not fit- it is too “flash”.

Although, linguistically speaking, there is nothing to choose between Aboriginal English and Australian English, the two dialects have very different status within the community. Australian English embodies majority values and is the linguistic passport to success and acceptance. Aboriginal English is rarely given any official recognition. It is often assumed that, if a person can speak English, they must be able to use Australian English with confidence and correctness, while the reverse is never assumed- that is, if a person can speak English they should be able to use Aboriginal English correctly and with understanding. It follows that Aboriginal people who, in many cases are much stronger in using Aboriginal English than in using Australian English, tend to suffer discrimination when it comes to receiving services intended to be equally available to all Australians.

This is particularly true when it comes to education. Education is heavily dependent on language, and one of the primary aims of mass education is to impart literacy. Aboriginal students have often been identified as having difficulty in achieving literacy outcomes, yet the fact that their primary form of English is not the form in which literacy is being imparted is rarely taken into account.

The linguistic problems associated with school failure and alienation are, of course, not only the technical matters of the dialectal differences between the children's English and that of the school materials and educators, but more importantly the more subtle problems of the experience of devaluation which these children experience when the dialect which carries their culture and identity is treated as irrelevant, or even as a barrier, to their education.

To most Indigenous Australians the experience of the loss of their traditional languages is a sad reality. The laudable attempts which have been made at language reconstruction and revival are, for many metropolitan and urban Indigenous people too little too late. However, urban Aboriginal people are often insistent that the absence of their language does not amount to the loss of their culture. One of the key instruments which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have used for cultural maintenance is Aboriginal English. Recent research involving urban Aboriginal people working with linguists at Edith Cowan University has shown that Aboriginal English, despite its superficial similarity to Australian English, is a rich repository of Indigenous culture. It incorporates levels of meaning which relate to traditional Aboriginal values, relationships and ways of life. It also maintains Indigenous cultural patterns in the genres and community based verbal art forms it incorporates, and in the ways in which it follows certain interactional conventions.

In making this submission to the Inquiry into the Needs of Metropolitan and Urban Dwelling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, we wish to draw attention to the fact that Aboriginal English is already a significant element which binds urban and metropolitan Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to their counterparts in areas where the cultural links are more obvious. Aboriginal English is a symbol of shared Aboriginality. It has sometimes been described as an Aboriginal person's "linguistic skin", since it is a more reliable marker of Aboriginality than the colour of one's skin. A better recognition of the place and value of Aboriginal English in contexts of service delivery and, especially education, would be an important factor in overcoming the alienation experienced by many urban Aboriginal people.

In particular, in relation to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, we wish to make the following recommendations:

1. That, in keeping with Term of Reference 1, an investigation should be made of existing programs and services provided for urban dwelling Indigenous Australians to determine the respective roles of Australian English and Aboriginal English in the delivery of services, with a view to ensuring that Indigenous Australians are not discriminated against through lack of access to services in their own dialect;
2. That, in keeping with Term of Reference 2, provision should be made for the fuller involvement of urban Indigenous people in decision making affecting their local communities by setting in place bidialectal procedures (which may involve bidialectal interpreters) where communication takes place with government representatives;
3. That, in keeping with Term of Reference 3, support should be provided for ongoing research to determine the situation and needs of Indigenous young people in urban areas with respect to the use of English in the management of health, education, employment, homelessness and involvement with the law;
4. That, in keeping with Term of Reference 4, the place of Aboriginal English in the maintenance of Indigenous culture be recognized and opportunities be provided for Aboriginal people in urban areas to extend the role of Aboriginal English in literature and community based verbal art.

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