



PRESS RELEASE

**STATEMENT BY DUNCAN KERR, COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN, ON THE
TABLING OF THE REPORT**

"Language and Culture - A MATTER OF SURVIVAL"

This inquiry was undertaken because of widespread concern over language loss amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people. Before European settlement of Australia there were approximately 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. These were quite distinct languages which between them included about 600 dialects.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages have been poorly understood by non-Aboriginal people over the last 200 years and a number of misconceptions about them persist. In keeping with early colonial attitudes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages were regarded as primitive and action was taken to eradicate them.

Contrary to popular misconceptions these languages had complex grammars, rich vocabularies and subtle ways of describing the world around them.

These languages are a means of group identification and contain embedded within them much of the culture, social values and world view of the language group.

Only about one tenth of the original languages survive today in a relatively healthy state. About a third of the original languages continue to be spoken but are under considerable threat, often being spoken by only a handful of elderly speakers.

The importance of a language to its speakers and descendants is much more significant than the linguistic aspects alone. This inquiry has sought to cover the wider language needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including those whose language has been partially lost.

Language Loss

The loss of language that occurred soon after European settlement was largely due to the reduction in speaker populations from the ravages of introduced diseases, to displacement and to massacres. The healthiest Aboriginal languages today are those

in areas least settled by Europeans or where settlement has occurred comparatively recently.

On missions and government run settlements the use of indigenous languages was frequently banned and in most cases discouraged. Children were severely affected where they were separated from parents at an early age. The most crucial factor in language loss is the failure in the language link from parents to children.

Aboriginal English

There are a range of dialects of English known collectively as Aboriginal English. The failure to recognise these separate dialects leads to several problems. Many teachers still treat Aboriginal English as an uneducated or corrupted form of Standard Australian English.

The committee believes that the failure by schools and teachers to identify, accept and take into account the separate features of Aboriginal English is a major factor in Aboriginal children's poor performance in school. In other situations, such as courts or hospitals, the failure to identify and comprehend Aboriginal English significantly limits the effectiveness of those institutions.

What Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People want

The committee spoke with as many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as possible during this inquiry. Many expressed their deep concern at the loss which had already occurred in their language and the further loss that was likely. At various levels they wished to maintain, revive or retrieve as much as possible of their language.

Most groups saw Aboriginal control of programs involving their language as essential, including school based programs. The committee believes that a flexible approach is required in supporting language maintenance with individual communities determining their own priorities.

Consistent
with the
current approach
being advocated by
CTA.

Language maintenance activities

Language maintenance objectives include: increasing language awareness, increasing pride in language and culture and reducing unnecessary pressures that are destructive of language. Language maintenance also involves the recording of languages and developing dictionaries and grammars.

The committee recommends that a language awareness campaign be directed to all Aboriginal communities with living traditional languages, to draw attention to the dangers posed to languages, even strong languages.

The lack of understanding in the wider community about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages places unnecessary barriers in the way of the use and maintenance of these languages.

Community based programs

Community based programs are adapted to the needs and priorities of the particular community. Regional language centres service a number of language communities and have representatives of their various language groups on their management committee.

The committee believes that the valuable role played by these centres should continue and that further centres should be established to service other language speaking regions. These regional language centres and community programs need to be adequately funded.

Interpreter services

Interpreter services are an essential part of language maintenance if traditional languages are not to be obliterated by the dominant language. Unfortunately there is an almost complete lack of interpreter service available.

There are many situations where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people can be disadvantaged or harmed through being misunderstood. In hospitals and courts, for example, a trained interpreter is essential.

The committee recommends that:

The Commonwealth establish under ATSIC a separate national interpreter service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Teacher Training

While many schools now offer suitable language programs, some children coming to school with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language are still being taught only in English. Children are rejected by this lack of acceptance of their language and because some teachers still denigrate ATSI language whether it is a traditional language, a creole or Aboriginal English.

ATSI communication and social interaction styles are usually not comprehended by teachers without appropriate training and consequently such teachers cannot be effective in teaching most ATSI students.

Funding
outside
AEP.

In N.T. would be
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The committee believes these inadequacies have a disproportionately large negative effect on these students. The committee believes basic teacher training should adequately prepare teachers for the range of students they are likely to teach.

School based programs

Schools have a very large impact on language and in the past this has been a quite destructive one. It is important that they play a constructive role in language maintenance wherever possible.

COI,
Did you
agree to this,
I didn't.

All states and territories have agreed to introduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies units into their curriculum to promote knowledge of ATSI cultures and languages. Despite improvements in the delivery of education services to ATSI students, education outcomes continue to fall well below the average for all students.

The committee believes that the provision of a basic education is an essential human right that should be available to all children and young people in Australia. As a further human right, education should be available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a way which reinforces rather than suppresses or contradicts their unique cultural identity. This includes an understanding and respect for their home language.

The committee recommends that:

- . all teachers are adequately prepared by pre-service training to appreciate the special needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- . more specialised training is provided to teachers before they are posted to more traditional communities. This should be followed up with in-service training;
- . teachers in remote community schools where the vernacular is other than English should have prior training in teaching English as a second language.

Training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers

Where appropriate, teachers should be fully fluent in the traditional language of the community. The number of ATSI teachers is still far too low.

The number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders graduating as teachers is increasing but is well short of meeting the demand. ATSI people gaining a degree often have more attractive employment options than teaching.

If the number of teachers fluent in a traditional language is to be increased then remote area teacher training programs are the most likely providers of those

teachers. Graduates of these programs are far more likely to stay and teach in their own community and are less likely to experience the high attrition rates for ATSI teachers elsewhere.

The committee recommends that:

adequate resources are made available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote area teacher education so that the growing demand for such training can be met and accreditation standards maintained.

The committee recommends that:

the availability of language teacher and linguistics training to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people be substantially increased.

History of policy and programs

From 1788 until the 1970s government policies and programs involved harsh assimilatory pressure in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language and identity were largely denigrated and repressed. The beginning of recognition and support for some ATSI languages occurred in the 1970s through bilingual education and other institutions. The 1980s have been characterised by a resurgence in ATSI language and awareness and the beginning of government sponsored language maintenance efforts.

A National Aboriginal Languages Program was established in 1987 under the National Policy on Languages. Following an earlier Green Paper the Commonwealth released a White Paper in September 1991 on *Australia's Language* containing an Australian language and literacy policy.

While the National Aboriginal Language Program (NALP) was criticised for some shortcomings it did begin to redress the serious neglect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and gave a large degree of control to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Regional language centres grew and played a significant role in the program as well as direct assistance being given to many community based programs. A review of the program in 1989 found that the educational, linguistic and cultural potential of the program was enormous. The review also found DEET management of the program had an overly educational orientation, lacked clarity in program goals, and provided little co-ordination between projects.

The committee is critical of DEET's limited outlook and management of the NALP program. Attempts by DEET to transfer NALP functions into an education program, the AEP, were totally inappropriate. An attempt was also made through the Green Paper to limit language maintenance activities to 20 languages claimed to be the only ones where language was being actively transmitted to children. This

I agree.
It probably doesn't matter how the funds are apportioned for local programs, as long as all who wish to access the funds know what the rules are, and how they to access funding.

ignored the broader language service needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Fortunately this extremely restrictive view did not reappear in the White Paper.

The Aboriginal Languages Initiatives Program announced in the White Paper supports a national network of Regional Aboriginal Language Committees extending the present number of centres and increasing the level of funding.

A conference of ATSI language organisations in December 1991 agreed to a structure for the network. A further conference in Alice Springs this week is finalising that structure. The committee recommends that this structure should be endorsed by the Commonwealth and that state and territory governments should contribute more to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language maintenance.

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