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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Affairs,

**Inquiry into Language Learning in Indigenous Communities**

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Trevor Stockley (1). I write in regard to the important cultural, social, educational, language and well being issues surrounding Australian Indigenous languages today. All of Australia's Indigenous languages are in jeopardy and under threat to various extents.

**Abstract**

I hope to draw the attention of the committee to the quite different situations in which these languages are found across present day Australia and importantly, to the different language programs required to support these languages. The majority of languages are no longer spoken or are critically endangered and require re-awakening and revitalisation language programs. There are only a handful of languages, which are regarded as strong and intergenerational, still being learnt by children as their first language and these languages require maintenance programs.

## Re-awakening and Revitalisation Programs

There is no doubt about the important position which language holds in the lives of many Indigenous Australians. There are personal and social issues surrounding identity, respect, wellbeing, mental and physical health on a personal and a community level, which are linked with language change and loss.

The process of re-awakening and revitalising those languages, which are no longer spoken or remembered, is a strong tool in personal and community development. Language learners have feelings of wellbeing, self-respect, empowerment, identity, self-satisfaction and belonging when hearing and speaking their ancestral language. Showing respect to Indigenous languages and culture, learning about and using your language, will help in understanding your indigenous history and identity. It is a strong tool in that it provides many beneficial social, emotional and educational gains to people. Gaining an awareness of an Indigenous language offers both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians a good opportunity to better understand our combined history and to gain an understanding of Australia's Indigenous heritage of languages and culture. It is a positive way to help close the gap.

To achieve the best results from Indigenous language programs, it is essential for all involved to work together. To consult Elders and the language community, to understand the needs of the language and learners, to discuss the reality of what might hopefully be achieved through a language program which fits the language situation. These programs fall into three broad language situations,

- Re-awakening and awareness language programs for languages that are no longer spoken, with little being remembered.
- Revitalisation language programs where spoken language is limited to older generations and is no longer learnt as a first language by children.

- Maintenance bilingual/multilingual programs for those Indigenous mother tongue learners, including Australian Kriol/Creoles.

History shows us how quickly Indigenous languages can stop being spoken and how quickly cultural and land knowledge is lost. We now understand how seriously this loss impacts on personal identity, how it impacts on an emotional and social level and how it has produced further devastating consequences at a family and a community level.

My most recent on country language work with Indigenous languages, was as an Aboriginal languages teacher (researcher and program writer) to deliver weekend language awareness workshops and graduated language programs at a community level, in North Queensland. I am a contributing author in the recently published (2010) 'Re-awakening Languages - Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages'. Rather than re-write my views on the positive outcomes of re-awakening and revitalisation language programs here, I will attach Chapter 8, from the above publication from Sydney University Press (2). This excellent publication offers a broad discussion, including Indigenous languages programs in schools, language nests in early childhood programs, and further examples of re-awakening and revitalisation language programs across Australia. I highly recommend this publication to the committee.

### Maintenance programs for Indigenous first language learners.

There are a small number of intergenerational languages, which have not been decimated and lost and need to be maintained. If a language is not intergenerational, then it is not being passed on, not being learnt and spoken by children as their first and most important language, their language of learning and understanding their world - their mother tongue. These remaining intergenerational languages are mostly found in the Northern Territory and also in the north of Western Australia and Queensland and in the north of South

Australia. These are the language communities where learners will need quality bilingual/multilingual maintenance programs from early childhood, through their primary and secondary schooling, opening many opportunities to work and study in English and/or their Indigenous language during their schooling and into the future.

The establishment of bilingual programs in NT, WA, SA and QLD, schools during the 1970's, was seen as affirmative action and had strong local Indigenous community, wider public and government support. Bilingual education was a show of respect and solid recognition of Aboriginal Australian languages and culture. It also recognized the right of Indigenous children to learn in their Indigenous mother tongue and to be guided by a fundamental education principle of planning activities, which will move the learner from the 'known to the unknown'. It was a successful way to initiate meaningful and respectful consultation with Elders and to follow their wishes in maintaining and promoting their intergenerational languages, in their remote community schools for future generations. Bilingual programs were established during an enlightened period in Australian history, which saw changes in thinking and funding in Indigenous policy and a more truthful understanding of Australia's history by the general population.

The remaining Indigenous language speakers may have survived the policies and racist thinking of the past, but they are now being subjected to changes which force their languages out of schools and onto to the margins of society. The denigration, the lack of consultation and consideration, the lack of respect continues; the gap widens.

As an example, at the end of 2008 the NT government announced a new Indigenous education policy, 'First 4 hours in English', which forces Indigenous language speaking children to learn in English, for the first 4 hours of each day, and effectively closed the last 9 bilingual programs. There was absolutely no

consultation, respect or regard for the views of Elders and parents or teachers and no evidence to support such a decision. There has been a noticeable lack of community support for the new English based policy, evidenced by a reduction in school attendance rates at previous bilingual/multilingual schools. We can only imagine how Elders and parents of these last dozen strong Indigenous languages feel, as the best bilingual/multilingual education, required to support and educate their children, is denied them. This is a decision, which will have serious negative effects on their children's education and future lives.

The NT Government (as well as WA, QLD and SA), ignore the consequences to Indigenous people and their communities of being denied their surviving Indigenous languages and culture. They dismiss the consequences to Indigenous mental and physical health, the social and identity issues, the basic education issue of learning in first languages and the academic evidence, which supports maintenance of Indigenous languages. By forcing the use of an English based education model which relies on stripping away the child's mother tongue and disregarding the child's prior cultural learning, they continue to widen the gap. The situation is compounded by the continual deployment of inadequately trained non-Indigenous teachers who do not hold an English as a Second Language (ESL) qualification.

The 'English for first 4 hours' policy decision has not only educationally disadvantaged Indigenous children who are language speakers, but has also had the effect of pushing many of these important intergenerational languages even closer to a critical loss situation.

I am not denying the need for Indigenous language speaking students to learn good English skills delivered by ESL trained teachers. English skills are necessary in Australia today. English skills are advantageous in employment and in further education, and they are helpful for life interactions with people who have not (yet) learnt to speak your language. There is plenty of highly creditable

and positive research evidence available, both international and Australian, which corroborates the beliefs of Elders, parents, teachers and researchers, who believe that well-resourced and supported bilingual/multilingual maintenance programs, in combination with high student attendance, good health and social well-being, can be and has been, successful. Bilingual/multilingual maintenance programs allow the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking to develop in both the learners Indigenous language and in English. These programs promote students who have a positive self concept and a deeper understanding in all areas of their education, such as science, maths, music etc. through learning in their first language and this will in turn, lead to proud bilingual/multilingual adults who are confident and literate in both their mother tongue and English.

Early childhood is an incredible time, of learning about their world and their place in it, for all young students. It is a time to enrich and develop language skills. It follows then, that for those children who have an Indigenous mother tongue, this important early learning time should be in their first language. Quality bilingual/multilingual maintenance programs will introduce and develop English skills through planned, supportive ESL lessons (4). The right to a mother tongue early childhood learning program is a basic human right, knowing that English will have its place in the child's bilingual/multilingual education at a later stage.

The Australian children whose mother tongue is an Indigenous language must have the same educational opportunities and support afforded to Australian children with English as their mother tongue. Learning in your mother tongue is not a difficult idea to grasp. In Australia English speaking children, are sent to schools, which use English in their learning programs. The same thing goes for children with English as their mother tongue in Canada, unless of course, you have French as your mother tongue in which case those children attend schools using French in their learning programs. So why is it that if you speak an Indigenous language in Australia as a mother tongue, you must attend a school which uses only English in their learning programs?

The handful of intergenerational Indigenous languages, still spoken by communities who are living on country, being learnt by children as their first language continue to hold the deep knowledge of the land within a framework of culture. These languages must be urgently supported and generously funded to ensure their continued survival and maintenance. The truth is that these are the **very last** of the fully spoken and intergenerational Australian Indigenous languages. These unique languages of the land should hold the status of national treasures.

### Recommendations

The intergenerational Indigenous languages need to be maintained and strengthened. The communities who speak their Indigenous language as their first language need:

- To be proudly celebrated for their continued ability to fluently speak their own Indigenous languages on country.
- To be supported and respected for the increasingly rare, deep cultural knowledge which is embodied in speaking their own traditional languages on their country.
- To be able to teach their children their languages and cultural knowledge in bilingual/multilingual maintenance programs, to re-enforce and support their children's Indigenous learning, well being and identity.
- The right to respectful, meaningful and timely consultation processes with Elders and language speakers, in regard to language and education decisions concerning their children and grandchildren.
- Support in developing and sustaining strong School Councils to enhance and show actual Indigenous control of education for their children.

- Generous and continued funding and resources to develop bilingual/multilingual education maintenance programs, staffed by Indigenous educators working with Elders, which support the continuing transmission and learning of Indigenous languages to younger generations of learners.
- An enriched, positive and supportive early childhood language maintenance education which enables Indigenous mother tongue language speaking young children, to move from their secure Indigenous 'known knowledge to unknown knowledge', using good early childhood education practices.
- A quality primary school education, which offers an Indigenous bilingual/multilingual maintenance program as part of a wider education curriculum in mother tongue Indigenous language speaking communities.
- A quality high school education, which continues to offer Indigenous bilingual/multilingual maintenance programs as part of a wider education and is based and delivered locally, in remote Indigenous language speaking communities.
- A quality Tertiary and/or TAFE education, which continues to offer Indigenous language and culture programs as part of their wider subject options and is based and delivered locally, in remote Indigenous language speaking communities.
- Support in the continued development of adult Indigenous literacy programs and in the production of language resources and materials to support these adult programs.



- To expect other Australians to learn to appreciate and respect Aboriginal languages and aspects of history and culture within their school education and in general Australian life. Particularly those non-Indigenous people living and working within these remote communities and high status public and political figures in Australian society.

### Closing the gap

During a recent visit by our Prime Minister Julia Gillard, to Nhulunbuy NT, all Australians saw and heard the Prime Minister in an interview on ABC national television, repeatedly refer to the mining town of Nhulunbuy NT, as Gove. This was a disturbing example of the casual disregard and dismissal, which non-Indigenous Australians hold toward Aboriginal people and their language rights.

Nhulunbuy is the sacred name given to that place by Wuyal, a law maker and important Yolngu ancestor figure in the creation of the Dhuwa languages, cultural practices and land for that area. It is a place of much significance for Yolngu people. Nhulunbuy has been its Aboriginal name since time immemorial.

The decision to officially name the mining township Nhulunbuy and definitely not Gove, came about after much persistent negotiation. A petition (5), written in Yolngu Matha with an English translation was sent in 1968, by Yirrkala Elders and land owners, to the House of Representatives, Canberra. This petition asked that respect be shown to the Yolngu people, their Yolngu culture and religious beliefs, their Yolngu languages and their land, by retaining this sacred name - Nhulunbuy.

Our Prime Minister called it Gove.

Rest assured, that Yolngu Matha speakers of north-east Arnhem Land, including children, have learnt and know this history well and for those who heard the Prime Minister's dismissive de-name and re-name, it was a particularly poignant

and hard felt denigration of themselves and their fore-fathers. We don't need to hypothesize about the repercussions and consequences of such statements, we just need to take a look at history - the picture is still plain and clear today.

Please feel free to contact me.

Regards,

Trevor Stockley

(1) I speak Gumatj and worked 1979-1992 at Yirrkala and Laynhapuy Homeland schools (NT), focusing on Yolngu control, the inclusion of Yolngu knowledge in a balanced curriculum, implementing Yolngu ways of working and community-based teacher training. I worked at Cairns TAFE as a curriculum writer and teacher for the Diploma of Indigenous Australian Language Studies. My community language revival work in north Queensland includes work as a specialist Aboriginal languages teacher and program writer for the Warrgamay and Gudjal language revival programs. I have delivered Language Awareness workshops for the Warrgamay, Djirrbal, Ngadjan, Girramay, Nyawaygi and Gudjal language groups and written accompanying Handbooks and Soundbooks'. I am a contributing author (Chapter 8) to the recent publication "RE-AWAKENING LANGUAGES Theory and practice in the revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous languages".

**(2) ' RE-AWAKENING LANGUAGES Theory and Practice in the Revitalisation of Australia's Indigenous Languages'. Chapter 8.**

Editors J. Hobson, K. Lowe, S. Poetsch, M. Walsh,  
Sydney University Press, N.S.W Australia, 2010

**(3) 'Gaps in Australia's Indigenous Language Policy: Dismantling Bilingual Education in the NT.'**

J. Simpson, J. Caffery and P. McConvell.

AIATSIS Discussion paper Number 24, 2009

AIATSIS, Canberra.

[www.aiatsis.gov.au/research\\_program/publications/discussion\\_papers](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/research_program/publications/discussion_papers)>

**(4) 'Bilingual Works.'**

Yalmay Yunupingu. Yalmay is a Gunitjpirr miyalk and a senior multilingual teacher from Yirrkala NT.

Page 66, in Australian Educator Magazine

Winter Edition 2010 <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/AE/AEissues.html>

**(5) 'Aboriginal Placenames'. Chapter 17,**

'This Place Already has a Name'

M. Wilkinson, Dr R Marika, and N. Williams.

[epress.anu.edu.au/aborig\\_history/placenames/pdf/ch17.pdf](http://epress.anu.edu.au/aborig_history/placenames/pdf/ch17.pdf)