

Introduction

- 1.1 The Mabo decision of the High Court of Australia on 3 June 1992 legally recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a special relationship to the land that existed prior to colonisation. The Mabo decision recognised that 'terra nullius', the concept that Australia was unoccupied at the time of colonisation, is a fiction.
- 1.2 Similarly, the notion that Australia is a monolingual nation and that only Standard Australian English can benefit a person is a fiction. Estimates show that at the time of colonisation there was an estimated 250 Australian Indigenous languages being used and today there are about 18 languages, strong in the sense of being spoken by significant numbers of people across all age groups.
- 1.3 This report recognises and celebrates the languages of Australia's Indigenous peoples who were the original owners of this land for tens of thousands of years.
- 1.4 Across Australia, there has been a groundswell of activity in the area of language maintenance and revitalisation. The Committee was impressed by the dedication and passion of people involved in Indigenous languages projects in urban, regional and remote locations.
- 1.5 Language work is close to the heart of many Indigenous Australians. The important role that language plays in terms of understanding and transmitting culture and reinforcing the ties between kinship, country and family was highlighted, as was the devastation to communities that results when language is lost.
- 1.6 A key understanding emerging and profoundly informing this report is that Indigenous language is inseparable from culture, and is the foundation upon which the capacity to learn and interact productively with other people is built. In the Committee's 2011 report into the overrepresentation of Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system,

Doing Time - Time for Doing, Indigenous language was identified as an important component of cultural connection, strengthened intergenerational relationships and community building. Many people referred to Indigenous languages including traditional, contact or creole languages, as playing a significant role in the wellbeing of young Indigenous people.

- 1.7 The Committee sees the benefits of greater recognition of Indigenous languages as having a positive impact on slowing the rapid decline of Indigenous languages, improving self-esteem and identity for Indigenous Australians, assisting in all areas of Closing the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage and improving reconciliation outcomes for all Australians.
- 1.8 The Committee found that the use of languages, including Indigenous languages and Standard Australian English, can assist in improving education, vocational and economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011 data, 16.6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island language speakers report that they do not speak English well or at all.¹
- 1.9 Throughout this report the use of the word 'Indigenous' respectfully refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia.

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.10 During the Committee's previous inquiry into Indigenous youth in the criminal justice system, language was identified as an important component of cultural connection, strengthening intergenerational relationships and community building. Many people referred to competency in and recognition of Indigenous language as playing a significant role in the wellbeing of young Indigenous people.
- 1.11 The Committee Chair approached appropriate Ministers for terms of reference for an inquiry into Indigenous languages. On 5 July 2011 the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Minister for the Arts jointly referred the inquiry.
- 1.12 The Committee was asked to inquire into and report on Indigenous languages in Australia, with a particular focus on:

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing*, 2011, <[www.agencysearch.australia.gov.au/search/search.cgi?collection=agencies&form=simple&profile=abs&query=census of population and housing 2011](http://www.agencysearch.australia.gov.au/search/search.cgi?collection=agencies&form=simple&profile=abs&query=census%20of%20population%20and%20housing%202011)> accessed 12 September 2012.

- the benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages
 - the contribution of Indigenous languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Indigenous identity and culture
 - the potential benefits of including Indigenous languages in early education
 - measures to improve education outcomes in those Indigenous communities where English is a second language
 - the educational and vocational benefits of ensuring English language competency amongst Indigenous communities
 - measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services
 - the effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages, and
 - the effectiveness of the Commonwealth Government Indigenous languages policy in delivering its objectives, and relevant policies of other Australian governments.
- 1.13 The Committee invited submissions from interested organisations and individuals. The Committee sought responses to a questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to find out about specific language projects in communities across Australia and was intended to be used as a guide for people to make a submission to the inquiry who might not normally do so.
- 1.14 The Committee received 154 submissions from a variety of sources, including Commonwealth, state and territory government departments, Indigenous rights' advocacy groups, Indigenous representative organisations, land councils, Indigenous media organisations, language centres, linguists and a range of other academics, and many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and individuals. A list of submissions received by the Committee is at Appendix A.
- 1.15 The Committee conducted 23 public hearings in Canberra, Newcastle, Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide, Utopia Homelands, Alice Springs, Broome, Halls Creek and Darwin, as well as teleconferences with witnesses in Arnhem Land, the Pilbara, the Kimberley region, Innisfail, Perth, Victoria and Tasmania. A list of public hearings is at Appendix B.
- 1.16 In travelling to a variety of locations, such as Newcastle, Utopia Homelands and Halls Creek, the Committee heard Indigenous languages in daily use and recognised their place in Indigenous culture.

- 1.17 Submissions received and transcripts of evidence can be found on the Committee's website: <http://www.aph.gov.au/languages>
- 1.18 The Committee was given a number of children's books, flashcards, DVDs, posters and other material displaying the richness of Indigenous languages and how language is being taught to our young people. The Committee thanks those that provided examples of the many language resources being developed around Australia.

Structure of the report

- 1.19 Chapter 2 examines the evidence the Committee received from Indigenous Australians about what their languages mean to them. It discusses the link between language and culture, and how that shapes people's sense of identity. The chapter discusses the cultural knowledge, kinship and ancestral stories which are embedded in Indigenous languages, and are transferred from one generation to the next through those languages. The chapter discusses the value of promoting Indigenous languages as a vital part of Australia's living cultural heritage and how a greater recognition of and support for Indigenous languages can help to Close the Gap on Indigenous disadvantage.
- 1.20 Chapter 3 examines the policy context for Indigenous languages in Australia, including the limited support those languages have received from Australian governments in the past. The chapter discusses the current National Indigenous Languages Policy, the policies of the states and territories, and the sources of funding that are available to support the range of activities that are being undertaken to maintain and revive Indigenous languages. The chapter discusses proposals to recognise Indigenous languages in the Australian Constitution, and international human rights instruments that have relevance to Australian Indigenous languages policy.
- 1.21 Chapter 4 examines the value of commencing education in a child's first language and or incorporating some elements of Indigenous language, with an emphasis on the partnerships that can be strengthened by incorporating Indigenous languages in schools. The chapter discusses a range of issues that were raised during the inquiry, including school attendance, student and community engagement in education, the benefits of language nests, bilingual education, strategies to improve Standard Australian English language competency, the Australian Curriculum and literacy and numeracy assessments.

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- 1.22 Chapter 5 discusses the training and qualifications required to teach Indigenous languages and the career and accreditation pathways available to Indigenous language teachers. The chapter discusses the important role of Indigenous language teachers in the classroom, especially in schools with high numbers of Indigenous students with English as an additional Language/Dialect needs, and attracting and retaining Indigenous language teachers.
- 1.23 Chapter 6 explores access and the provision of Indigenous interpreting and translating services across Australia, including the development of the National Framework for the effective supply and use of Indigenous language interpreters and translators, protocols on engaging Indigenous interpreting services, the proposal for a National Indigenous Interpreting Service, and the accreditation and competency training for Indigenous language interpreters.
- 1.24 Chapter 7 discusses enhancing networks and sharing language materials to ensure that Indigenous languages are preserved for the future, and examines best practice examples of good record keeping and the use of new technologies to document languages. The chapter examines the role of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) as the largest repository for Indigenous languages material in Australia.

