



August 2011

Re: Senate Inquiry in to indigenous language learning in Indigenous communities

To Whom It May Concern:

From 2004-2010 Big hART produced the award winning *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project.

Ngapartji Ngapartji was based on Arrernte country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) from early 2005 - mid 2010.

Ngapartji Ngapartji had many layers involving language learning, teaching and maintenance, community development, crime prevention, cross cultural collaboration and creating new literacy training models as well as film, art, policy and theatre making.

One of the key aspects of the project was advocating and lobbying for a national indigenous languages policy to be adopted. Big hART welcomed the announcement of the development of this policy in 2009. However we believe it could go further and welcome the opportunity to respond to this senate inquiry.

We consider the situation of indigenous languages to be dire and we encourage urgent policy coordination and funding delivery to support language maintenance and revitalisation.

Please find below our response to the terms of reference.

Yours sincerely,

Alex Kelly
Creative Producer

Ngapartji Ngapartji

The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Indigenous languages

Australia faces the most rapid loss of languages anywhere in the world. This is in a global climate of the loss of a language every two weeks. Languages are crucial to maintaining cultural diversity and protecting them is imperative to not losing the richness of knowledge that is embedded in languages. Australia's indigenous people represent the oldest continuing human civilisation on earth. Therefore their languages are rich cultural libraries of knowledge and information that Australia should place a huge value on.

In addition to the history and knowledge embedded in languages, languages are a core part of culture. For Australia to take indigenous languages seriously and give deeper attention and recognition to these languages would be to shift the psyche of the nation. Australia is making substantial shifts in regards to its relationship and understanding of its indigenous history and impact of colonisation. Supporting indigenous languages as a nation would take this even further.

Probably most important of all is what indigenous languages mean to indigenous people themselves. Languages are a source of pride, cultural identity and knowledge. It is the Australian government's responsibility to support indigenous languages for future generations of indigenous people to be able to access their heritage and languages.

Australia is also a signatory of multiple international conventions which enshrine the rights of indigenous people to be able to speak their own languages including the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

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

Any government policy related to indigenous people would benefit from embedding language maintenance and revitalisation as central to its program. Languages are intrinsically interlinked with culture, health and well-being and the way that people see and interact with the world. A demonstration of support for languages demonstrates a deep respect for indigenous people and their culture. Working across, with and through language builds stronger rapport between non-indigenous project workers and indigenous communities and better relationships and cross-cultural relationships can improve service delivery substantially.

· 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

It has been demonstrated by numerous national and international studies that there is a correlation between first language literacy and English language learning. For students to have improved education outcomes, increase school attendance and retention and to see better results in English competency stronger first language programs are key.

· Measures to improve Indigenous language interpreting and translating services

Indigenous language interpreting and translating services are fundamental to best practice service delivery especially in remote communities and should be supported.

Provision for interpreting and translating should be built in to every budget for every service delivery organisation in remote Australia, both government and non-government. Making this part of the landscape of work in remote Australia will support the employment of indigenous interpreters and shift the culture of English delivery of crucial service information.

· **The effectiveness of current maintenance and revitalisation programs for Indigenous languages,**

Language and cultural programs are effective, but need to be given greater recognition and publicity.

They also need more support across departments and an increase in funding to the Maintenance of Indigenous Languages and Records program. Substantially more projects apply than there is funding to support. Given the urgency of the situation – all indigenous languages could be lost in the next 50 years – the Australian government should be responding more seriously to support languages to survive and be revitalised.

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

There needs to be stronger direction given to the departments and programs across government, which impact languages. This includes all remote service delivery; housing, health, education and justice. It also includes curriculum development, interpreter services, training.

Indigenous languages also deserve constitutional recognition as the national languages of Australia.

The National Indigenous Languages Policy announced in 2009 needs to be backed up by an increase in funding and coordination of programs across departments.