Reconciliation AUSTRALIA

PO Box 4773, Kingston ACT 2604
Old Parliament House,
King George Terrace, Parkes, ACT 2600
TEL 61 2 6273 9200
EMAIL enquiries@reconciliation.org.au
WEB www.reconciliation.org.au

Secretary of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

9 September 2011

Dear Committee members,

Re: Inquiry into language learning in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Reconciliation Australia is making this submission regarding the first two terms of reference of the inquiry:

1. The benefits of giving attention and recognition to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages
2. The contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to Closing the Gap and strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and culture.

<u>The benefits of recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages</u>

It is important to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples of this country and that their languages are unique to the history of Australia. Reconciliation Australia sees a strong link between recognition and reconciliation. By recognising the contribution of the First Australians, we will grow as a nation and improve fairness and equality for all; leading to respect and developing better relationships.

Recognition and respect for the languages of First Australians as a valued aspect of Australia's culture will reinforce the pride of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As we all experience, being recognised as a valued member of society fosters positive self-confidence, contributing to mental and physical health and well-being. When we are genuinely recognised we feel empowered and our self-determination increases.

Building the recognition and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages will also contribute to the national pride of all Australians. The concept of shared pride in the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is a key part of reconciliation in Australia. Reconciliation will be advanced when all Australians feel that they can share in the history, culture and pride that is part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

According to the latest findings of the Australian Reconciliation Barometer 70% of respondents feel that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are important to Australia's identity as a nation. However, only 50% feel personally proud of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. The Barometer indicated that one of the obstacles to increasing shared pride is that less than half (44%) of non-Indigenous Australians feel that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are open to sharing their cultures[1]. Reconciliation Australia believes that people need to feel confident in their cultures in order to share it and speaking the language/s that are connected to that cultures is a key way in which people develop and maintain confidence in their cultures.

In more recent research commissioned by Reconciliation Australia in 2011, we found that many non-Indigenous Australians would like to be proud of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, although many feel they have limited understanding of it[2]. The development and implementation of the national curriculum presents an opportunity to increase the recognition and appreciation that young people have of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. The latest Barometer taken in 2010 shows that two thirds (66%) of the general population believes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories should be a compulsory part of the history curriculum in schools[3].

Therefore recognition of the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and cultures will reinforce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' self-pride and contribute to the shared pride that all Australians have of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. These changes are vital to the process of reconciliation.

The contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to Closing the Gap

Reconciliation Australia understands the term 'attention' given in the terms of reference as meaning the promotion and preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and believes that this will facilitate progress towards the Closing the Gap targets. The Social Justice Report of 2009[4] found that strong language and culture are associated with resilience and better health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The promotion and preservation of languages will also lead to increased social engagement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Social Justice Report cited research showing that improved cognitive functioning in children was achieved through bilingualism in schools. In particular, learning in one's native language has been shown to facilitate literacy acquisition[5].

When people engage in their first language, they are better able and more likely to access services. A study by the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health[6] examined the provision of health services for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It found that where high quality language interpreting and translating was provided for health services, it resulted in improved quality of care, better health outcomes and increased access to health services.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians with a strong connection to culture through language will be able to continue to make rich contributions to Australia's culture. Cultural

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[1]Auspoll (2010) 'Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2010',viewed 5 September, http://www.reconciliation.org.au/barometer2010

[2]Auspoll (2011) 'Effective communication of constitutional changes to recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people' p26

[3]Auspoll (2010) 'Australian Reconciliation Barometer 2010'

[4] Australian Human Rights Commission (2009) 'Chapter 3 the perilous state of Indigenous languages in Australia' in *Social Justice Report 2009,* p.60, Available at: http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sj_report/sjreport09/pdf/sjr_2009_web.pdf

[5]Australian Human Rights Commission, p. 62

[6]Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (2006) '*Language Services in Victoria's Health System: Perspectives of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Consumers'* Available at:http://www.ceh.org.au/downloads/final_report.pdf

knowledge and concepts are carried through languages and therefore people who maintain their language are able to maintain a strong connection to culture. In turn, “strong culture gives the individual a sense of belonging to people and places. For this reason, language and culture are deeply interconnected and core parts of one’s identity[7].”

While the benefits of preserving and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages are clear, the loss of language and culture can have negative consequences. It can negatively impact on resilience and this can lead to stress and problems with socialisation and communication which will hinder progress towards the Closing the Gap targets.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at [redacted] or on [redacted] if you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Karen Mundine
General Manager—Policy, Strategic Development and Communications
Reconciliation Australia

[7]Australian Human Rights Commission, p. 60.