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

by Dr. Stephen Morey

Background:

It is very heartening that the Parliament is holding an enquiry into language learning in indigenous communities. Language learning by children in minority communities is, of course, essential to the maintenance and survival of those minority languages. Australia is very fortunate indeed to have as part of our cultural heritage the indigenous communities and their languages. I take it as axiomatic that the preservation of Aboriginal Languages is desirable, essential and deserving of substantial investment by the taxpayer. I strongly urge the committee to recognise the great importance of these languages and the need to assist in their preservation as high priority goals for the Australian community.

The challenges to maintaining small languages in the modern world are considerable. My work experience since 1996 has been the documentation and academic description of a number of tribal languages spoken in North East India, ranging from languages that are no longer spoken at all (but preserved in an indigenous written tradition), spoken languages that are on the verge of 'extinction', spoken languages that are now heavily influenced by the local majority language through to those that are still healthy but perhaps not for long.

One of the key features of language loss is the dispersal of community. Wealthier people in the villages in which I work send their children to English language schools – for perfectly understandable reasons. These schools are often residential, and children from different tribal backgrounds are brought together and speak in languages that are not their own.

In the Australian context, present Government policies to encourage people to leave the indigenous homelands and outstations in the Northern Territory, by starving homelands of funds for essential services is in effect a return to the mid 20th century policies of assimilation. The effect will be to hasten the decline in the usage of indigenous languages, by throwing together diverse groups who do not speak a common indigenous language.

I wish to stress the need for Parliament to support languages in those communities where they are still spoken as the first language. This is the major priority for language maintenance. The needs of first language speakers of Indigenous languages (termed L1 speakers) differ from those of English-speaking Indigenous people seeking to restore ancestral languages.

The following factors need to be recognised in developing language policy:

a) There is considerable pressure on L1 speakers to switch to using English as the main language of communication.

b) When a language ceases to be spoken by children, it is very hard to restore it as a living means of thinking and communication in a community.

Both of these factors are exacerbated when communities relocate from homelands and outstations – either by choice or as a result of Government policies. Once in the larger towns, there are few first language speakers of Indigenous languages compared with English-speaking Indigenous people. The pressure is then increasingly to use English more and more often in comparison with their own indigenous language(s).

A further factor that needs to be recognised is that children brought up and educated bilingually are not educationally disadvantaged by that. Indeed world wide evidence suggests the opposite.

I urge the committee to accept that because most first language speakers of Aboriginal languages live in remote areas, they have less access to government funding, grants and services for maintaining Indigenous languages. I urge the committee to increase the funds available for well thought out language maintenance programs, programs that are developed in parallel to the teaching of the national language (English).

One method of language maintenance is that adopted in New Zealand and known as 'Language Nests'.

It is well established in the linguistic and educational literature that for many children the use of the child's first language as the medium of instruction in the classroom mother-tongue medium instruction (multilingual or bilingual education) is best practice. I urge Parliament to recognise this and to provide more resources for mother-tongue medium instruction.

Around the world, communities desire to maintain their languages, or to restore them if they are lost. Take the case of the Tai Ahom in North East India. Though not actively spoken as a mother tongue for about 200 years, yet large numbers of people in the Tai Ahom community spend considerable time studying the surviving sources and attempting to revive the language. For generations this work was done without any Government support.

Today in Australia government is rightly supporting those indigenous communities in Southern and Eastern Australia who want to regain their languages, at considerable cost and substantial effort. Supporting the existing languages can be done by the kind of policies outlined above, and by listening to the indigenous people who want to remain on their land. In the recent issue of Amnesty International's *Human Rights Defender*, 'Motorbike Paddy' Ngal, of Camel Camp in the Utopia homelands, had this to say:

"I live here, I grew up here: this is my country' and 'I'm also the custodian of my country's knowledge and history; its sacred sites, ancient rock art and bush medicines.'

Australia is one of the world's wealthiest countries. We live in a time where people and governments have material wealth at a greater extent than ever before. We can easily afford to spend the resources required to assist communities like those of 'Motorbike Paddy' Ngal to preserve their linguistic heritage, a heritage that is unique irreplaceable.

It is essential that the wider community, led by the Parliament, recognise Indigenous languages as the first languages of Australia and that in many communities maintenance and restoration of language is essential for reconnection to culture and identity, and for community well-being. This needs to be enshrined through recognition of Indigenous language rights.

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Website: http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rclt/StaffPages/morey.htm

Language data website: http://sealang.net/assam
Dictionary websites: http://sealang.net/ahom; http://sealang.net/singpho; http://sealang.net/phake

Linguistic data archived at::
DoBeS: http://corpus1.mpi.nl/ds/imdi_browser/ and following a link to DoBeS archive then Tangsa, Tai and Singpho in North East India
ELAR: http://elar.soas.ac.uk
PARADISEC: http://www.paradisec.org.au

North East Indian Linguistics Society: http://sealang.net/neils