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Submission No.48

Language Learning in Indigenous Australian Communities

Submission to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

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Yurra wanhdharra? Nganhdhaan ganaa. [Greeting in Guugu Yimidhirr, Australia's oldest recorded language since 1770]

The Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership thanks the Committee for your invitation to make a submission to the inquiry into language learning in Indigenous Australian communities.

We would like to make a brief submission. We wish to respond to the questions in the Terms of Reference in a different way. Instead of discussing policy details, we wish to outline the principles that we think Australia must follow if the Government's worthy objective of saving our Indigenous Australian heritage is to be achieved.

1. Our country needs to recognise that it is a national priority, second to no other priority, that all our Indigenous Australian languages shall live as spoken mother tongues and languages of written literature and public services.

2. The Indigenous Australian languages must be officially recognised languages of the Commonwealth and the States. Once this correct principle is recognised, significant limitations to the use of Indigenous Australian languages may be made for practical reasons.

3. Indigenous Australian children have a human right to have an ancestral or historical Indigenous Australian language as their mother tongue and the language of their heart. This requires that Indigenous Australians and Non-Indigenous Australians speak to the children in these languages from the time the children are born.

4. Non-Indigenous Australians should be encouraged to learn Indigenous Australian languages.

5. It needs to be understood that a language is not only a means of communication. To preserve a language, we must also preserve the entire spoken literature of that language, and document the speakers' way of life.

6. In the globalised world, the language of a culture is the key to that culture. People's experiences, education, working life and ways of life will be increasingly similar in the future. Communication and interaction between people will continue to increase. Distinct cultures will, to a decreasing extent be transmitted because of geographic, linguistic or other barriers. In such a context, culture will be something that people choose to retain, rather than something that is impressed upon them. However, to be able to choose to retain a culture in a world where people's backgrounds and knowledge are increasingly similar, a person needs to know the language of that culture, preferably from childhood.

7. Indigenous Australian languages are incompletely known. It is a popular misunderstanding that all available information has been collected. More pieces of Australia's heritage are lost as we speak. An urgent effort is needed to record all literature and all details of usage, syntax, morphology and vocabulary that are unrecorded.

8. Indigenous Australian languages need to be used in all social, administrative, educational, legal, commercial, scientific and technological domains. Languages that are not allowed to go through this process of expansion to new areas of use will be disadvantaged and may incorrectly be perceived to be inferior.

9. A new professional corps needs to be created: government employees whose main task it is to speak and further develop Australia's languages. In each language, especially the threatened languages, there needs to be a group of people who are trained and paid to

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maintain the language and speak it all the time regardless of demographic shifts or other social or economic changes. People who are interested in the language can then approach members of this group to learn and maintain the language.

Thank you for reading our submission.

Nganhdhaan guna guuguwi bamaagami bidhagurrgal yirrgii. [Let's speak to the children in Indigenous Australian languages.]

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