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#A LANGUAGE POLICY FOR AUSTRALIA

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Questions of language policy in Australia have rarely been addressed in a comprehensive manner. Migrant communities have long been concerned with an array of issues covering maintenance of their own languages, and access to suitable English teaching and to services through translating and interpreting, but policy in these areas has developed in a haphazard manner, with often little sustained interest shown by Australian institutions.

A good deal of interest therefore has been created by the deliberations of the Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts, which has since May 1982 been considering the "development and implementation of a co-ordinated language policy for Australia". The establishment of such an inquiry was pressed both by ethnic representative bodies (migrant and Aboriginal) and by organizations of language professionals - linguists, applied linguists, language teachers and academics. Indeed the language issues that have often troubled migrant communities have also in various ways animated language professionals, who have had to cope for example with a decline in foreign language studies in schools, difficulties in establishing and maintaining community language programs, disorganization of translator/interpreter services, serious underresourcing of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, and above all a severe lack of data and information which could be used as a basis for planning.

The Commonwealth Department of Education has been a prime mover for such an inquiry since the mid-1970s, and through its contacts, especially with language professionals, has had a chance to develop a coherent outlook on language - at least those aspects related to education. Also, the Department has assisted or itself conducted most of the important investigations into language teaching in Australia over the last decade: no fewer than 22 reports or submissions are documented by the Department since 1975, attesting to the quiet but persistent growth of interest in this area. The work of a small group within the Department resulted in an important document that appeared just after the announcement of the Senate inquiry - *Towards a National Language Policy*. Written to encourage interest in language policy and to test community reactions, it set out an extensive agenda of issues that are closely reflected in the

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actual terms of reference of the Senate inquiry [see pp. 45-46 Terms of Reference].

This document argued that although Australian society had always been characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity, until recently "its predominant monolingual orientation denied a significant role to any language other than English". Now, with over a million bilingual Australians who regularly use a language other than English, it was time to reassess and co-ordinate Australia's language policies:

Present language planning efforts represent, in many cases, ad hoc responses to needs as they become identified. Programs in this area have therefore not always been co-ordinated. For example, the development of programs for interpreters and translators has moved ahead of the complementary development of training courses; community language programs have been introduced without planned continuity within the curriculum; language assessment procedures have not kept pace with either the changing purposes for which students take languages or the changing context of many courses.

The document went on to outline other language *needs* that have never been properly co-ordinated (ranging from adult literacy for English speakers, to ESL programs, to the language needs of the deaf), but also related these issues to the increasingly vocal concern of many communities in preserving and developing their own language, in the name of language *rights*. Beyond arguments of needs and rights, however, the document also stressed the urgency of considering language as a *resource*, to "take cognisance of Australia's total communication needs at local, national and international levels".

WHAT A NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY IS NOT

In understanding the context of the Senate inquiry, two crucial factors must be borne in mind. Firstly, language policy is of particular concern to migrant communities, but the Senate inquiry's concern with this is *not* primarily as a migrant or ethnic issue. Under the terms of reference the considerations encompass *all* languages used in Australia, and a good deal of the deliberations will be about *English*, and aspects of English for English speakers. Other issues covered will include Aboriginal languages, languages of the deaf, and regional and international language problems. Diagram 1 gives an indication of how extensive and often how interconnected the Senate inquiry issues are. Quite explicitly, policies dealing with language will appeal to a broader constituency than migrant

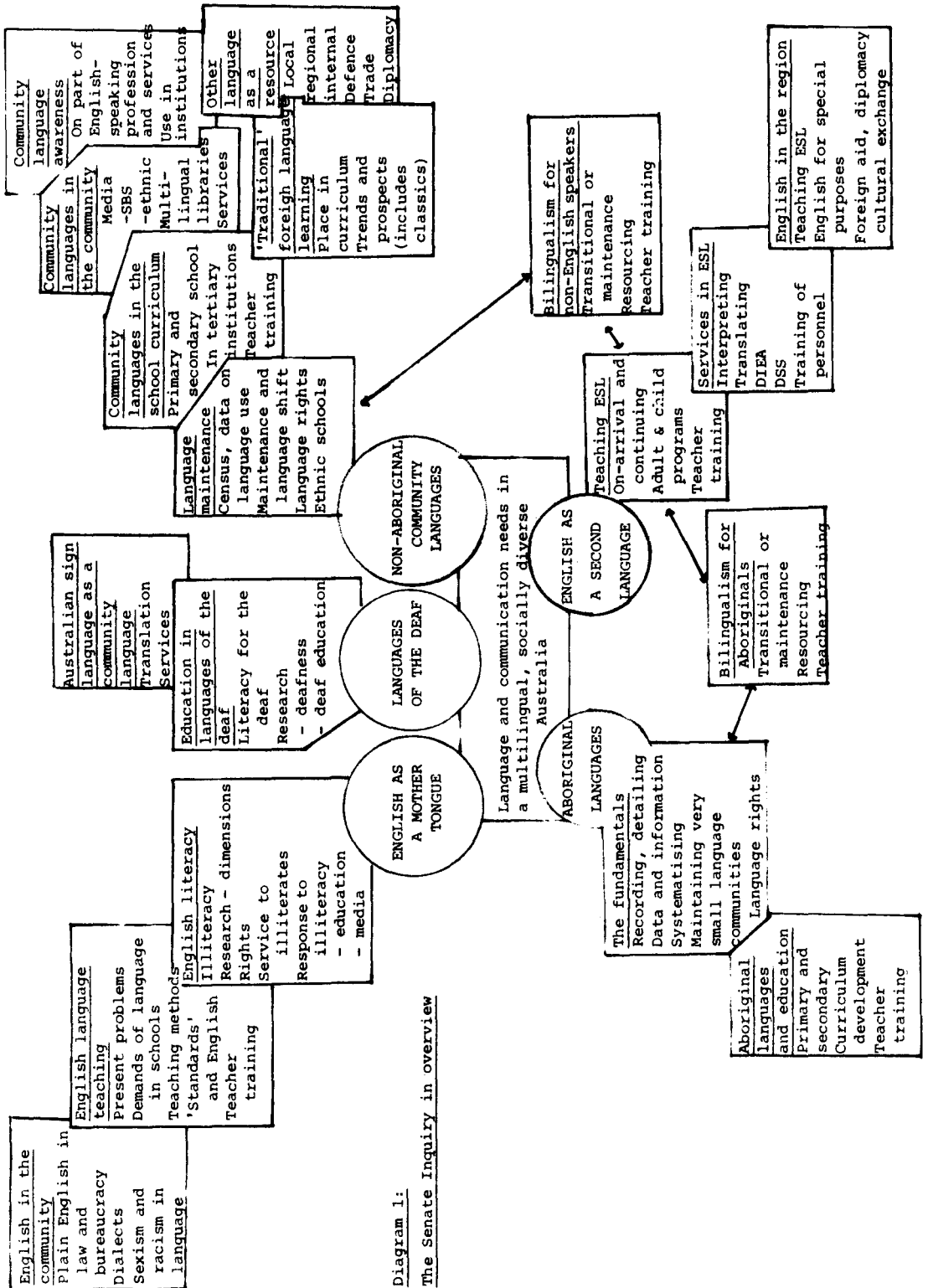


Diagram 1:

The Senate Inquiry in overview

communities alone, and migrant communities may well note the range of other interested parties who share language problems and concerns.

Secondly, it is worth dispelling a few of the more outrageous interpretations that have already arisen in the press over what a 'language policy' is intended to be. While the Senate inquiry perse has received little press coverage, suggestions for community language maintenance and foreign language education have from time to time been targets for backlash to aspects of multiculturalism. Among the fears of correspondents to *The Australian* were those of, for example, the Anglo-Saxon Keltic Society, which wrote that they were an organization "working to have English declared our official and first language" as the status of English was seriously under threat in a multilingual society (October 30-31, 1982). Another letter, attacking Al Grassby's call for the development of bilingual citizens, argued that English was the only language worth speaking in Australia, and that "artificially force-feeding the children of migrants with their left-behind cultures and traditions is a retrograde and divisive step". (October 25, 1982). A number of other 'everyone forced to learn Swahili' type arguments were rehearsed and debated in those columns.

As the terms of reference indicate, the status of English is certainly not under threat, nor is there any attempt to elevate other languages to 'official' or 'national' status. One misinterpretation that could arise, however, was related to the oft-used description 'national language policy', with its connotation of defining what were and were not 'national' languages. Several groups, among them the Ethnic Communities Councils, urged the committee not use this formulation but the clearer 'national policy on languages' or, as is now used, a 'co-ordinated language policy'.

The above reactions and defences of monoculturalism may not be unexpected, but they do indicate that a constituency for a sympathetic consideration of language outside of English is by no means guaranteed. These views are of course expressed in more serious and worrying forms by other ideologues of the right in an ongoing attack on multiculturalism, as *Migration Action* has repeatedly documented.

THE SENATE COMMITTEE HEARINGS

The Senate Committee has, at the time of writing (September 1983) met in public sessions in all capital cities with parties that have made submissions. A little over 230 submissions have so far been received, and in response to the considerable interest aroused the inquiry has continued its work after the recent change

of government, with Senator Colston (ALP) replacing Senator Teague (Liberal) as chairman.

The submissions and representations to the committee present an invaluable source of insights into the thinking of official bodies and community groups over a range of language issues. A number of issues may be of particular interest to readers of *Migration Action*.

Bilingual Education. While the issue of bilingual education has been constantly addressed in many other countries (e.g. Canada, USA, multilingual European and Asian countries), the Senate Committee hearings have revealed that there is still very divided opinion over the desirability and feasibility of bilingual programs in Australian schools. The Department of Education's *Towards a National Language Policy* argued that although the number of bilingual programs has recently increased in Australia, they -

are often considered to be temporary, their dominant purpose being to enable children to maintain or develop their academic knowledge, while they are still learning English. Once enough English has been acquired, usually towards the end of primary school, education usually proceeds in English alone.

Such an approach to bilingual education, however, may not be meeting the demand for language maintenance programs for children from non-English speaking homes to fully develop their skills in their mother tongue as well as English.

The Schools Commission submitted that these kinds of *transitional* bilingual programs were the only ones feasible, and that "a policy of bilingualism for individuals is not likely given likely resource levels". In their appearance before the Committee the Schools Commission representatives argued that transitional bilingual programs began by accepting the child's first language but that

the aim is really to ensure that they are competent in English in the long run so that you start from the known and work to the unknown - the old pedagogical thing. The other view of bilingual education is, in fact, that you teach the subject matter in two languages ...The best example of that...would be the Canadian approach. The Commission view is that it does not see Australia developing along the Canadian model. As mentioned earlier, as far as it can see it sees there

being one official language. It agrees that the transitional bilingual approach is very useful and should be supported, especially for older students who come in as new arrivals, but also for Aboriginal children. Its view is, though, that anything more than a transitional bilingual approach, from what it sees, is unlikely to happen in Australia."

This issue was joined in several other submissions, which argued that bilingual programs should not be of the transitional kind alone but should also be concerned with language *maintenance*. This was argued by the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and by organizations representing attempts at fully bilingual schooling, for example the French-Australian School in Canberra which runs an integrated curriculum in the two languages; the Victorian Advisory Committee on Migrant and Multicultural Education (VACCME) - ironically, the body recommending on how to spend Victoria's share of Schools Commission multicultural education money; and Professor Clyne (Professional Language Associations) who reported on the success of maintenance-type bilingual German-English programs in some Melbourne primary schools.

In the light of these wide disparities of viewpoint and practice, sorting out acceptable models of bilingual education will be an explicit task for the Committee.

Community languages and language study. The issues of bilingualism and the place of community languages in schools are inextricably linked. The representatives of VACCME argued for an increasing role for community languages in school, and gave as examples schools in the Brunswick area that had systematically increased their teaching in these languages in a move strongly supported by parents. They cited the results of a survey

carried out among 10 per cent of the parents of kids in schools in Brunswick where the overwhelming result no matter what their language background was for community language classes for kids in all the schools. That sort of parental support has been echoed in many different parts of Victoria and is not confined only to the parents who do not speak English as the language that they identify with. That is, in Brunswick, for instance, and in quite a number of other parts of Melbourne parents who are basically English speakers support the idea of their kids learning another of the community languages at school. So we must ask ourselves why they would be so interested in that. One of the reasons seems to me to be that by now there are

many mothers and fathers who have had the experience of watching some of their neighbours' kids grow up to be bilingual. That is their neighbours speak Greek or Italian or a Yugoslav language at home and they have watched these kids grow up to be bilingual. So they say to themselves: 'Why can't our kids grow up to be bilingual too?'

This submission must have impressed the Committee, its chairman dubbing its case study as the "Brunswick grass roots model of enlightenment".

The potential of community languages within schools was argued by a number of other submissions as well; while traditional school foreign languages (French, German, Latin), have generally declined in student numbers in the last decade, community languages have steadily expanded, a move noticeable from the HSC level to primary schools. It is likely that the Committee will recommend on the extension of language study throughout the primary school.

At the secondary level, the committee has repeatedly and closely questioned witnesses on the strengthening of the place of *all* language study in the curriculum. The old question of compulsory language prerequisites for tertiary education has been raised, but the Committee has been very much more interested in alternative suggestions of witnesses that fell short of compulsion, considering in detail the time and resource commitments considered necessary for maintaining adequate language programs in schools.

The situation of community languages in *tertiary* institutions had been addressed in the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) *Review of Multicultural and Migrant Education* (1980) which had led to the establishment of eight new community language programs in tertiary institutions. The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) argued in its submission to the Senate inquiry that with this development there was no unsatisfied demand for language teaching in tertiary education. Other submissions cast doubt on this, particularly that from the Victorian Inter-College Committee for Multicultural Education, citing evidence that in the College of Advanced Education sector only 1.3% of students were actually taking any systematic study of languages. They argued that the study of languages (and especially language awareness programs to help teachers and other professionals meet language needs) needed urgent upgrading.

The testimony of the Tertiary Education Commission itself makes illuminating reading on how mainstream Australian institutions have sometimes little cognisance of language issues. One of the few

concerns that the TEC could identify in this area for itself was the possibility of duplication of language teaching in tertiary institutions in the same city, and consequent attempts in several universities to close down and amalgamate certain language departments, i.e. *close down* language learning possibilities, as the Senate Committee itself noted. Professor Dunbar of ANU represented the TEC but seemed a poor choice, having himself no background in languages and being rather out of his depth. His testimony did however produce the gem of the inquiry so far: asked if the TEC had been active in rationalizing language resources and aiming for excellence, Dunbar replied, " 'Active' is a word I find difficult to respond to."

CURRENT INADEQUACIES IN LANGUAGE PROVISION

Several areas were revealed in which the Committee was unhappy about present provisions and programs:

Data and information. A good deal of dissatisfaction was expressed by the Committee over the quality of data gathered in Australia about languages. Certain facets of the 1976 census question on languages spoken were deplored, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics was closely questioned on its choice of language questions in the 1981 census. The Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs was also questioned on its own data base and predictions of need for language services, as were most of the education bodies that presented evidence. Often very basic data was hard or impossible to obtain. One suggestion that has come up, from the Professional Language Associations, is to establish a National Languages Institute, which would have as one of its prime tasks the collection of language data - a job not presently systematically carried out by either government bodies or academic researchers.

Interpreter and translating services. A large scale review of these was undertaken by AIMA's *Evaluation of Post-Arrival Programs and Services* (1982), (the 'Georgiou Report', reviewed in *Migration Action* Vol VI No 1 1982). The Senate Committee did not wish to embark on another such enterprise, but the Committee repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction over the capacity of the present system to respond to changing needs. Witnesses and organizations who testified in this area met a very sympathetic hearing, and it is possible the Committee could have broad recommendations to make in this area.

Teacher training. Repeatedly witnesses were asked to comment on the present composition and quality of the Australian teaching force in regard to the range of language issues facing schools. There is interest in the availability and training of community language ESL teachers, and a set of problems faced by many ethnic

professionals: career structures for these teachers, and the problem of organizationally fitting teachers, careers and programs into schools. The quality of teacher-training courses was of particular concern, as was the almost total lack of language awareness in the training of secondary teachers who did not have specific methods of ESL or foreign languages. Among the possibilities raised during the hearings have been language-related studentships, bilingual teacher studentships, and intensification of inservice courses for many teachers presently underqualified, particularly in the community languages area. With teacher education and student support an obvious area of federal government involvement and financing, the Committee will possibly feel empowered to make quite specific recommendations here.

English teaching; English as a mother tongue. The Senate Committee's largest area of language concern - English and English speakers - has involved a good deal of discussion on the adequacy of present educational programs relating to English teaching. The Committee pressed witnesses on how English teaching could be improved and were interested in recent developments in theory and method in this area. The broader questions of literacy and illiteracy were also looked at - a vast, almost totally unresearched field in Australia. In respect of the performance in English language that was now demanded by the education system and more generally demanded in the society in terms of employment, communication and social acceptability, many native speakers of English in Australia were severely disadvantaged. It is not clear how the Committee will proceed on this issue: while not wishing to buy directly into the 'educational standards' debates of the recent past, the Committee is not well placed to take on the fundamental issues of class, language and power that are embroiled in questions of language difference and language disadvantage.

WHAT WE CAN EXPECT

The Committee hopes to reveal its report by February 1984, and there will then follow a period for public discussion and feedback. The federal government has promised to reply in detail to recommendations to be made by the Committee, giving the hope that the recommendations will begin to have immediate policy effects. Some of the areas of likely initiative from the inquiry have already been mentioned; while it would be foolish to predict the detail of the Committee's recommendations, certain areas have clearly impressed themselves upon the Committee:

1. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLAND LANGUAGES. Despite almost universal ignorance among Australians of these languages, they have some 50,000 speakers. Many of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages

are in great danger of becoming extinct (some have died out already), while some 50 are in a healthy position with in some cases numbers of their speakers growing. For many of the languages in greatest danger, essential work of systematically recording the language needs to be undertaken urgently to preserve these languages for posterity. For the groups whose languages are stronger, questions of language maintenance, bilingualism, education and media arise in the same way as for immigrants' languages. Bilingual education for Aborigines has been undertaken for over a decade in some parts of northern Australia, but in many state systems Aboriginal languages have been ignored totally.

The many groups representing Aboriginal interests who appeared before the Committee all stressed the urgency of the task and, equally strongly, the principle of community consultation that must underly language policy in this area. As argued by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies:

no decisions, no decisions of any kind in relation to their language should be made without the absolute certainty that Aboriginal people are supporting those decisions and that in fact, those are the decisions that Aboriginal people themselves want made in relation to their languages.

Again, Aboriginal issues are ones in which the federal government does have considerable scope for its initiatives.

2. OTHER COMMUNITY LANGUAGES. At a recent Congress of the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia at LaTrobe University, former chairman of the Committee Senator Teague gave some of his own priorities in thinking about language policy (In his own words: "May I just baldly set out some of my tentative conclusions!") In his own mind the issues of community languages, bilingualism and foreign languages in schools fell into four specific areas:

i) *Genuine bilingual schools.* Outside of Aboriginal languages there are only a handful of schools in Australia which could be termed bilingual. Some are outside the government system, a very few are in the government system, and some, such as the French-Australian school in Canberra, hold an ambiguous position of being in the government system but paying for some bilingual staff by recourse to fees levied on parents. Despite their scarcity, Teague saw a genuine place in the education system for such schools, but considered it likely such schools would be few in number and would often have to work out special relationships with government.

ii) *Ethnic schools*. Teague praised these as spontaneous and vital ethnic community initiatives, and considered they were most important in language maintenance. In some cases they may have needs for teacher training that should be attended to.

iii) *Transitional bilingual programs*. As a pedagogic starting-point, Teague considers such programs essential wherever there was a concentration of students beginning school without adequate English background. However, Teague argued that the line between *transitional* and *maintenance* bilingual programs was often not clear-cut in Australia: in many cases transitional bilingual programs have led onto a strong teaching commitment to community languages, a move to be encouraged.

iv) *Second language programs*. This is the category that will affect the most students, and most particularly monolingual English-speaking students. Teague was not in favour of compulsion in language teaching, but considered that through the proper organization of resources and commitment language study could be made 'as good as compulsory'. He thought it particularly important to expose all pupils to language learning in primary school, but also as part of a core of studies in years 8-10 of secondary school, with extensive language options in the last two years of secondary school. He argued that schools could be persuaded to make stronger commitments to language teaching - say, a 5-year commitment to a language being offered, to provide continuity, one or two years advance notice and training for teachers. School communities should choose which languages they should study. Through this policy, it could be possible to revitalize language education and also raise the proportion of students studying languages at HSC from the present 15% towards 25%.

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The Senate inquiry has come at a crucial stage in the language needs and development of the Australian community. It should however be recognized that there are limits to what even the best organized language policy can achieve, especially for ethnic communities. The Department of Education in its submission mentioned that among the many things a language policy *cannot* do, "it will not by itself ensure the survival of Aboriginal or of community languages in Australia." The vitality and commitment displayed by ethnic communities themselves will be determining factors in the viability of their languages. But perhaps now there is hope that they will not be carrying on their work unaided.

Reading Relevant to this Area: Department of Education - *Towards a National Language Policy*, AGPS 1982

M. Clyne - *Multilingual Australia*, River Seine 1982.

SENATE STANDING CTEE ON EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

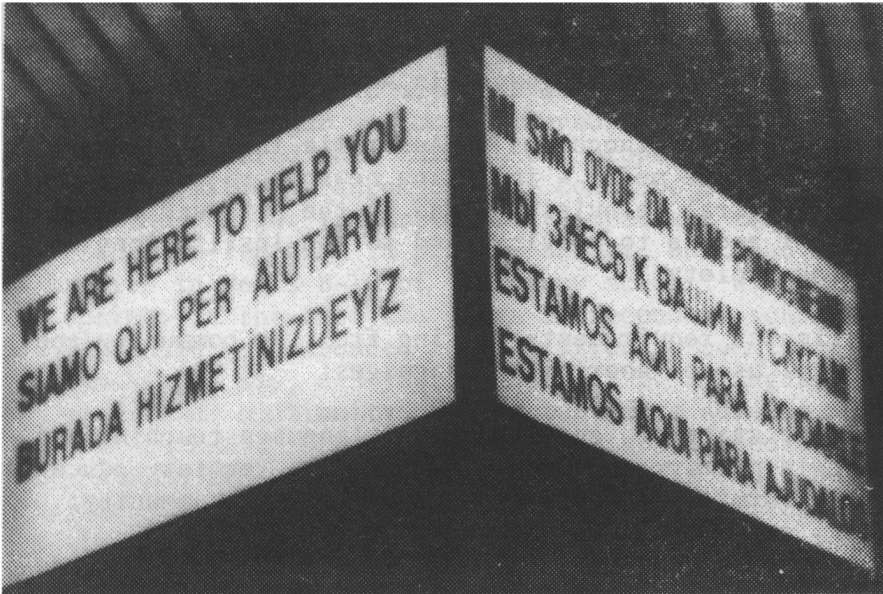
TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Development and Implementation of a
Co-ordinated Language Policy for Australia

In conducting this inquiry, the Committee will consider the following:

- (a) All aspects of, including guidelines for, a national language policy;
- (b) the role of English as a first and second language and its relationship to other languages in Australia;
- (c) the present use of languages in Australia including use in the community, in the media - including newspapers, ethnic radio and multicultural television - and in the arts and to extend equality of access to services and to the institutions of Australian society;
- (d) the particular requirements arising from the community and educational use of Aboriginal languages;
- (e) the current state of, and trends in, language teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools, tertiary education and other formal and informal programs in the community;
- (f) the extent to which existing policies, practices, attitudes, resource allocations and programs are adequate to provide for the appropriate development of Australia's language resources;
- (g) the language requirements in Australia necessary for trade, diplomacy, defence, tourism and cultural exchange especially taking into account Australia's regional and other international relationships;
- (h) the special language needs of the deaf and other persons with disabilities;
- (i) the ways and means of stimulating continuing public awareness of and interest in the development of Australia's language resources;

- (j) arrangements for the on-going implementation of a national language policy including the identification of priorities and the allocation of resources;
- (k) the provision of, and training for, translating and interpreting services;
- (l) the extent of adult illiteracy in English and the need for remedial programs.



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