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25 August 2022

Dear Minister

### **National Cultural Policy submission**

First Languages Australia is the national peak body working to ensure the strength of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Funded by the Office for the Arts, we support a network of language centres, community programs and industry partners covering the whole of Australia. Our efforts are designed to have both immediate and longstanding impacts on the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

First Languages Australia connects language communities often isolated by vast distances; to share their knowledge, experiences, resources and skills. The organisation takes a leading role in targeting issues that impact our languages. It shares critical communication from language communities with both government and key non-government agencies to bring about change. These changes affect the future strength of our languages – those spoken strongly today, the languages proudly being revived, and those that haven't been heard for many years. Together with the network of language centres and programs, First Languages Australia is working towards a future where all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language communities have full command of their languages and can use them as much as they wish to.

### **Why Australia's cultural policy should work to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages**

Australia is one of the world's linguistic hot spots. Present-day Australia covers hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, each with its own language and culture. As was recognised in *Creative Australia* (2013), these languages are among the oldest continuously spoken languages on Earth, and it's wonderful to contemplate the information held within them.

The languages, cultures and peoples of this continent are intrinsically linked, and to truly understand Indigenous Peoples and our Country, you must have an understanding of all of these elements. Embedded in each language is the knowledge of significant places, plants, seasons, traditions, songs and stories passed down over tens of thousands of years. Language is also vital to Indigenous wellbeing. Language offers a way for people to connect with the world around them, with other people within their own language community, and with people from other language communities. Australia will be a much better place when Indigenous language communities, their languages and cultures are strong and healthy and have the power to control their own destiny.

At the time of colonisation, there were hundreds of distinct Indigenous nations across this continent and a similar number of languages. Today fewer than 150 Indigenous languages are in daily use, and all our Indigenous languages are highly endangered. The good

*First Languages Australia is a national organisation working with community language programs around the country to support the continued use and recognition of Australia's first languages.*

news is that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are working to strengthen their languages. Through this work languages are quietly and persistently being restored to use and will live on in contemporary Australia. Together with hundreds of communities and organisations around the country, First Languages Australia is working to ensure our treasured voices continue to grow strong and vibrant. A strong cultural policy plays a vital role in supporting these community-led efforts.

### **Pillar 1: First Nations**

First Languages Australia asserts that respectfully celebrating the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to the uniqueness of the Australian identity should remain the first goal of any new National Cultural Policy.

In line with this goal, First Languages Australia is keen to see arts and cultural organisations at all levels think deeply and strategically about how they will engage with Indigenous languages, in line with custodian aspirations. These languages are not separate from their custodians and Country; thus, engagement requires the development of relationships that lead to community-led collaborations that meet the needs of participating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, our institutions and audiences alike. Central to this work is the application of Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property rights.

The work to strengthen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in the continuing colonial context is no small challenge. This continent has experienced 200 years of language decimation. While there is great hope and there have been pockets of success in language revitalisation, all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages remain radically endangered. Communities who are active in their languages are working toward goals for future generations.

The primary source of dedicated funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language activities is managed through the Office of the Arts, Indigenous Languages and Arts Program, highlighted in *Creative Australia* (2013). This funding program was established in 1988 by the Hawke Government and has continued under various names since. In 2018, the First People's Cultural Council of Canada published *A Global Perspective on Costing Indigenous Language Revitalization*. This report summarises governmental expenditure on Indigenous language revitalisation across ten countries. Table summaries are provided for both spending and the level of language endangerment. Comparisons between countries reveal a wide range of commitment; for example, while Spain, Norway and Scotland all spend upwards of \$500 per Indigenous person on Indigenous languages, Mexico spends less than 10 cents per person. In contrast, Australia invests \$18.82 per Indigenous person. The report also notes that Australia has a vastly higher number of languages than the comparison countries, and our languages are the most critically endangered. First Languages Australia is therefore keen to see increased support for language activities, so communities can become well positioned to participate in the audience opportunities presented by a robust National Cultural Policy.

Bliss, H. (2018). *A Global Perspective on Costing Indigenous Language Revitalization*. First People's Cultural Council.

<https://fpcc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bliss-Global-ILR.pdf>

In addition, Australia lacks the federal legislation to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language rights. As mentioned in *Creative Australia* (2013), from 2009–2015, Australia had a National Indigenous Languages Policy under the banner *Indigenous Languages — A National Approach*. This policy committed the Australian Government 'to addressing the serious problem of language loss in Indigenous communities'. However, the policy included little detail and was abandoned with the change of government in September

2015. First Languages Australia is ready and willing to work with the Australian Government towards developing legislation and policies that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in meeting their language aspirations and enacting their language rights as outlined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Ministry for the Arts. (2009). *National Indigenous Languages Policy*. Australian Government.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150301034938/http://arts.gov.au/indigenous/languages>

United Nations. (2007). *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. UNESCO.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

#### **Pillar 4: Strong institutions**

Moving forward, First Languages Australia asserts that a National Cultural Policy needs to focus on smaller local and regional organisations as much as major institutions. For First Nations, local communities and organisations provide the foundation for the work of larger, regional and national organisations.

For example, local and regional language centres and programs are at the forefront of efforts in increasing language strength. These community cultural organisations, groups and collectives all contribute towards the research, capacity building, resource production, training, documentation, community consultation, curriculum development and program design that enables the revival and maintenance of their languages within the protocols determined by their community. This challenging work is the foundation for all artistic and cultural activities and programs that involve language, and it must be recognised and supported to a sustainable level for cultural flourishing to occur.

Language Centres list: <https://www.firstlanguages.org.au/contact-local>

#### **Pillar 5: Reaching the audience and Pillar 2: A place for every story**

For First Languages Australia, partnerships are crucial to reaching significant audiences and achieving community language aspirations.

For example, First Languages Australia sees the work of our public and community broadcasters as essential in sharing the stories of place and Country that the Australian public desire. These agencies are well placed to work appropriately with local communities and artists to respectfully share their stories. The ABC charter is to broadcast programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and to inform, entertain and reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community. Over the past ten years, First Languages Australia has built a strategic relationship with the ABC to support the development of connections with their local Indigenous communities. Primarily this work has involved providing producers with creative tasks through which to approach language custodians as well as tools with which to manage Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) and community ownership of any materials produced. We have negotiated for content to be made in collaboration, led and owned by the custodian participants for their ongoing use, with the provision of broadcast licences to the ABC. Although this type of contract was initially new to the broadcaster, it has subsequently become part of their regular engagement practice with Indigenous collaborators. This has allowed the films to have a long life beyond the ABC. These licences, agreements and work practices may also be a valuable tool for repositioning future custodian and creative partner organisation relationships elsewhere. In terms of the *This Place* project, the films had 4.6 million viewers on Facebook alone in the first six months. They are now distributed on ABC Education, in libraries, museums, galleries and

shopping centres. Several films also featured as part of Australia's contribution to World Expo Dubai. ABC *This Place* grew from an earlier collaboration with ABC Open, detailed in *Creative Australia* (2013).

ABC *This Place*, <https://iview.abc.net.au/show/this-place>

Thank you for your time in reviewing this submission. It may be published in part or full, with attribution.

Yours faithfully



Beau Williams  
First Languages Australia