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Aboriginal Heritage Faces Extinction

The third month anniversary of Sorry Day has come and gone, and the interest continues to wax and wane. What drives Lowitja O'Donoghue, one of Australia's most vocal indigenous advocates, to 'bow out, her heart heavy' over the Government's inaction. 'Sorry' words, no matter how profusely or often they are uttered, are not enough anymore. Immediate action is needed now more than ever for Government to address the grave problems facing Aboriginal people and to adopt a whole of government approach to tackling the problem of the Aboriginal people and their culture. The National Trust of Australia (NSW) has identified Aboriginal heritage as heritage at risk. Aboriginal culture is central to Australian society and there is the need to foster an acknowledgement, appreciation and understanding of the integral role of Aboriginal and indigenous culture as the foundation of our heritage, and for government to do something about it.

Top priority in the Aboriginal heritage at risk problems the National Trust is focusing on are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, the first languages used throughout Australia. These languages are in danger of extinction. The 'State of Indigenous Languages in Australia' submission by McConvell and Thieberger, 2001¹ reports that in the 1980s and 1990s the Government made a concerted effort to recognise the rights of indigenous languages and the need to support them. However, this recognition has not been reflected 'in any legislation guaranteeing rights or funding either nationally or in the states and territories' (2.1.12, Main Findings: State of Indigenous Languages in Australia – 2001). Government action is happening in fits and starts.

There has been a decrease of 90% in the number of indigenous languages spoken fluently and regularly by all age groups in Australia from 100% since colonisation (1800) to 13% in 1996. According to last survey figures completed, the fall has accelerated in the ten year period 1986-1996. If this trend continues unchecked, there is a possibility that there will be no indigenous languages spoken in Australia by 2050.

Funding for support of indigenous languages is inconsistent and short term. There is no whole of government policy framework or evaluation procedure for funding programs. There is a lack of assessment of the complexity of issues involving the ongoing use of indigenous languages. There is a lack of data resources and an integrated administration and principal repository of these data. There is a lack of cohesive and comprehensive methodology and process in the gathering of data. The timeframe is inadequate in the gathering of data and implementation of surveys.

¹ McConvell, P. and Thieberger N., 'State of Indigenous languages in Australia – 2001', 'Australia State of the Environment Second Technical Paper Series (Natural and Cultural Heritage)', Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra.

The National Trust made the following recommendations in a submission to the Prime Minister: Heritage is fundamental to building Australia's capacity for a sustainable future. To achieve a sustainable future the Government needs to establish a national endowment fund for cultural heritage, including Aboriginal cultural heritage, to complement funding for the natural environment.

The Federal, State and Territory Governments should develop a National Indigenous Linguistic, Cultural and Social Policy to conserve and promote Aboriginal and indigenous cultural heritage.

Research surveys into the state of indigenous languages should be carried out within a reasonable timeframe and must be constantly maintained and regularly updated.

All the databases currently being compiled (FATSIL, ATSIIC, AIATSIS, Census, Departments of Education, Media Organisations, other cultural organisations) need to be compiled and assessed with regard to duplication, updating, inconsistencies.

The Government should establish a standard National Indigenous Languages Database consisting of:

- A bibliography on indigenous languages available electronically
- A register of experts, research and language resources and centres
- An electronic archive on indigenous languages
- A conservation plan for endangered indigenous languages

The Government should establish a National Monitoring and Support Authority on the state of indigenous languages; particularly on nomenclature of place names, the justification for their choice, and whether local indigenous people were consulted in the process.

The Government should consider top priorities now and act on these priorities. The issue is extremely sensitive. The use of the terms 'Aboriginal' and 'indigenous' being questioned by stakeholders is evidence of how sensitive this issue is. The key factor here is cooperation and an integrated, collaborative approach and not one that should be politicised. The National Trust will hold a Brains Trust Forum to discuss Aboriginal Heritage, to find out what is really happening, what has been done, what is being done, what needs to be done.

Aboriginal languages are uniquely Australian. Aboriginal languages and cultures sit at the core of Australia's heritage. Every other language spoken in Australia in 2008 is a transplanted language, English included. As an Aboriginal Australian language dies, that's it, there is no repository of speakers overseas to save it from extinction. Much yet needs to be put in place to keep that which is so uniquely Australian, so much at the core of this country's cultural heritage, alive.

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