

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE SCHEME

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Announcement of policy made 25 May 2007

Policy announced by the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough

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On 25 May 2007 the Federal Government released a policy statement which declared that Indigenous children, especially those living in remote and economically deprived communities, should be forced to learn English in order to escape lives of poverty and inequality.

Stressing the need for English language education, the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, stated that he was considering implementing a policy that parents would risk losing welfare payments unless they ensured that their children have full school attendance rates.

The Federal Opposition Education spokesman, Stephen Smith, said that he agreed in principle with Brough's plan in order to improve the standards of Indigenous literacy and numeracy. However, Brough's comments were met with displeasure by some Indigenous leaders, who suggested that the plan was misdirected, and should focus on protection of Indigenous languages rather than emphasising a focus on English. Prior to colonisation, the number of Indigenous languages that existed is estimated to be about 600. Currently, there are 200 different Indigenous dialects across Australia, with about 20 in constant use.

Tauto Sansbury of the Aboriginal Justice Advocacy Committee stated that the plan was insulting and would only reinforce old-fashioned stereotypes, while Indigenous activist Sam Watson commented that the Government seemed to be 'inventing new ways of showing Aboriginal people cultural disrespect'. Indigenous NSW MP Linda Burney stated that while learning to speak English might assist Indigenous children from living lives of poverty and inequality, the Government's announcement was inconsistent with their previous policy of stripping money from bilingual education programs in the Northern Territory.

*The media release detailing the full statement of policy appears on the website of the Hon Mal Brough MP: <<http://www.facsia.gov.au>>. As this volume of the AIRR was going to print, it appeared that conditional welfare obligations attached to schooling would be introduced in the Northern Territory as part of the Federal Government's response to the Little Children are Sacred report.*