
OPINION

We do things differently up here?

'Informed sources' suggest that the Northern Territory Cabinet is currently considering a submission recommending the establishment of an Aboriginal Interpreter Service for the Northern Territory. If these sources are accurate one can only rejoice. This celebration can occur even without knowing the detail of the Interpreter Service that will be proposed. Even accepting, in the almost inevitable way of the current NT Government, that a service exclusively for Aboriginal people while staffed with dedicated individuals will be under-funded and unable to meet demand, celebrations are in order. For no matter what its shortcomings the new service (should it eventuate) is better than the existing situation where there is no service in the Top End at all and a limited service offered without NT Government support in the Centre (through the Institute for Aboriginal Development).

Celebrations aside, there remains the central question of why it has taken more than 130 years since the establishment of white settlement in the Top End to establish an Interpreter Service. There has clearly been plenty of incentive. In the past ten years alone there were two recommendations of the RCIADIC recommending the establishment of a service (both endorsed by the NT Government). There was funding for a pilot service which successfully operated for six months in 1997 but was arbitrarily closed down after the initial trial. The ABS has produced statistics showing that over 60% of indigenous households in the Territory (that is over 16% of all Territory households) speak an indigenous language as their first language at home. Add to this a few High Court cases suggesting that interpreters are a requirement in criminal matters (*Ebatarinja v Deland* (1998) 157 ALR 385 and *Re East ex parte Nguyen* [1998] HCA 73 (7 December 1998)) and a report from the Territory's own Anti Discrimination Commission that found the failure to provide an interpreter service was unlawful at international, domestic and Territory law, and clearly the pressure has been overwhelming even for the NT Government.

Of the 15 most commonly spoken languages in the NT other than English, the third, twelfth, fourteenth and fifteenth most commonly spoken languages (which are either European or Asian) have an interpreter service provided by *both* the NT and Commonwealth governments. The other languages do not. These languages are all Aboriginal languages. Legal and medical practitioners have been stating for years that the cost of not having an interpreter service in terms of misdirected treatment, and delayed trials exceeds the cost of establishing a service.

When faced with blatant racial discrimination such as this, the real question surely is not 'what has made the NT Government change its mind' but 'why was the government so reluctant to establish a service in the first place?'

Faced with this apparent economic policy and legal irrationality, one is left to presume that there has been an unstated policy basis in operation. That unstated policy would appear to encourage the abandonment of indigenous languages by ensuring the delivery of government services *only in English*. In fact, more accurately, *not only in English*. Speakers of a range of European or Asian languages will find an interpreter service (or two) readily available 24 hours a day. More accurately, the unstated policy would seem to ensure that government services are not delivered in indigenous languages. Interestingly at the same time as the recent Interpreter Service debate has been taking place in the Territory, the NT Government has closed down the (modest) bilingual education program in remote communities.

Parallels are often drawn between the physical situation of Australia's indigenous population and that of the peoples of many third world nations. Parallels can also be drawn between Australia's indigenous population and ethnic minorities in the Balkans, Central and East Asia and Africa who are also faced with cultural annihilation through prohibitions on the use of language. Surely this fact puts a malicious edge to the indifference displayed to Australia's indigenous peoples' physical conditions?

Before readers in other jurisdictions righteously (and rightfully) condemn the 'cowboys' in the Northern Territory for these calculated attacks on indigenous culture, it is worth recalling that the federal government also delivers services in the NT and has also taken no action towards establishing an Aboriginal Interpreter Service. Similarly, this writer is not aware of other than *ad hoc* interpreter service arrangements in other States. It would seem then to be a national phenomenon. It suggests that while the country may, these days, be prepared to conceive of itself as multicultural, the indigenous population continues to suffer under a national 'blind spot' that would prefer them to just go away.

Its not that we do things differently in the Northern Territory, we do things exactly the same as they have been done in the rest of the country for centuries.

Matthew Storey

Matthew Storey is Associate Dean of Law at the Northern Territory University.