



IT IS STILL THE *BALANDA* WAY

AMY THOMAS HOW GOVERNMENTS APPROACH INDIGENEITY

In July last year, ABC's *Four Corners* aired 'Australia's Shame', a disturbing exposé on the abuse of juvenile Aboriginal prisoners at the Northern Territory's Don Dale Youth Detention Centre. The story was picked up by a Yolŋu radio station, but the newsreader soon ran into a problem: there is no Yolŋu word for *torture*. They substituted the English.

Yolŋu, spoken in north-east Arnhem Land, is one of Australia's healthiest Aboriginal languages.¹ That is not to say that Yolŋu, along

with the twelve other languages categorised as 'strong' in the 2014 National Indigenous Languages Survey (NILS), is not under threat.

The last couple of years have seen, somewhat curiously, a revived interest in Aboriginal languages. Labor MP Linda Burney's maiden speech, which included an introduction in Wiradjuri, was celebrated as a milestone; it was the first time an Aboriginal language had been spoken in parliament. *The Guardian* has launched 'Our Country, Our Voices', a

series devoted to Aboriginal languages, and SBS has developed an impressive multimedia resource, 'My Grandmother's Lingo', about the endangered language Marra. There are apps and games in development, and some schools in New South Wales and Victoria have signed up to programs offering Aboriginal languages as a LOTE subject. You could be forgiven for thinking Aboriginal languages were finally being respected and resourced – but you would be wrong.

You would be wrong because there's a connection between the catastrophic situation in remote Aboriginal communities and the future of living Aboriginal languages. While measures to revive languages are inspiring and should be supported (so far these efforts have been allocated meagre funding), they do not represent a solution, or even a sufficient understanding of the problem. We must recognise that the structures and policies that severely damaged these languages in the first place still exist, and in some places, particularly in northern Australia, they are being re-imposed with alarming vigour. The most spectacularly brutal example is the Northern Territory Emergency Response, known to most as the NT Intervention, and later rebranded as Stronger Futures by the last Labor government.

It is in areas where Aboriginal languages are still part of day-to-day life – the NT, northern Western Australia, northern Queensland and northern South Australia – that Intervention-style measures have taken the ground out from underneath Aboriginal communities. Yingiya Mark Guyula of the Yolŋu Nations Assembly, elected in a surprise upset for Labor in last year's NT elections, put it this way:

We talk about closing the gap, but what gap are we talking about? The people of my electorate understand that this gap is the gap created when Yolŋu law is not

properly acknowledged. When the power of self-determination is increasingly being removed, that gap grows. When our people are starved out from the homelands and forced into major growth hub towns by the [lack of funding for] our infrastructure, health facilities, roads, homeland schools ... That gap grows when Yolŋu children are forced into English-only schools, taught in a language they do not speak or hear in their community, like sending a Balanda [white] child to a Yolŋu language-only school in Darwin.

As Guyula suggests, the misery and racism on display in Don Dale is the product of 'neo-assimilation' policies. For the last decade, Indigenous Affairs debates have been dominated by the 'viability' of remote Aboriginal communities. The future of Australia's linguistic landscape will be determined by the outcome of this debate. It does not seem too drastic to say that if we do not win the fight against neo-assimilation, all of Australia's Aboriginal languages could be lost within a few generations.

Back in 2015, when Tony Abbott was still prime minister, he famously summed up the bipartisan political position on this matter: remote communities are 'lifestyle choices' that the government cannot 'endlessly subsidise'. These supposed financial constraints did not stop him and his cronies from marshalling immense state resources to establish racialised forms of control over Aboriginal lives. The ultimate goal, of course, was to force the closure of remote communities.

When the WA government's plan to close up to 150 communities was announced in 2015, it provoked widespread criticism and protest. But this proposal did not come out of the blue: it was just the most recent in a string of protectionist and assimilationist manoeuvres.

Australia presents one of the worst examples of language death anywhere in the world. There were around 250 distinct Aboriginal languages at the time of colonisation and, it is assumed, hundreds of dialects. The pattern of invasion and settlement is mirrored in the extinction of languages: densely populated coastal regions, where dispossession was enforced and maintained early on, are the same areas where traditional languages are extremely rare today.

Tasmania, one of the first sites of Australia's frontier wars, is a case in point. The brutal invaders very nearly succeeded in wiping out the entire Aboriginal population, and with them their languages; almost nothing survives of Tasmanian Aboriginal languages. The slim historical record (a few wordlists and a poor-quality audio recording from 1903) is all linguists and Aboriginal people seeking to revive the languages have to go off.

Today, Australia might be losing languages at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world. According to the NILS, only 120 Aboriginal languages are still spoken in any way at all, with only thirteen categorised as 'strong'.² Most are considered severely or critically endangered; the race is on, in many remote areas, to catalogue languages before their last speakers die (a project undertaken variously by university linguistic departments, language centres and volunteers). According to the 2011 census, only 11 per cent of Indigenous people spoke an Aboriginal language at home (this figure excludes Aboriginal English, the commonly used term for Aboriginal ways of speaking English).

The colonists described Aboriginal languages as primitive, with many pedalling the myth that there was, in fact, only one language (Justine Kenyon made this claim in *The Aboriginal Word Book*, which remained in print as late as the mid 1970s). Of course, there is no such thing as a primitive language: all languages have subtle,

intricate and ever-evolving systems of grammar. Varieties of formal registers and sign languages are common across Aboriginal languages. In *Australian Languages: Their Nature and Development*, Robert Dixon cites one phenomenal example from the language Rembarrnga, where a single word means 'it [the kangaroo] might smell our sweat as we try to sneak up on it'.

The reality of Aboriginal languages was inconvenient for the colonisers: the drive to extinguish Aboriginal existence was predicated on the evolutionary and cultural inferiority of Aboriginal people. It is this same logic that produced an Australian capitalist class concerned – then and now – with denying the brutality of colonisation and insisting on the legitimacy of the state's claim to land. In that sense, the mere existence of Aboriginality continues to be a problem; it is a threat to the country's enforced historical amnesia. Writing on the low status of Aboriginal workers in Australia, sociologist Bill Thorpe notes that 'there remains an underlying structural hostility to any form of Aboriginal identity and practice, particularly claims on land, that may impede capital accumulation.'

Pre-colonial Aboriginal societies were extremely diverse, but there were shared qualities. Social structures were egalitarian and collective, with no accumulation of wealth. Land was part of social relationships and belief systems, rather than being understood as private property.³ In *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Henry Reynolds quotes a Victorian clergyman who complained that it was 'difficult to get into a black-fellow's head that one man is higher than the other'.

Aboriginal social structures worked against the capitalist logic of the wool and cattle industries, leading to clashes between Aboriginal peoples and the colonisers. It was the latter's determination to enforce property ownership that provoked settler wars right up until the early twentieth century.

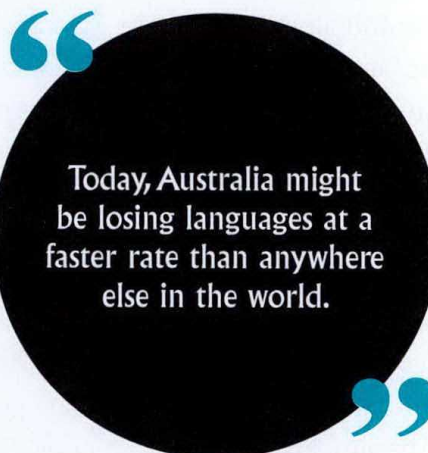
The desire to secure land capital and fortify the means of production, combined with a push to establish a system of wage labour, was at least part of the motivation for later policies separating Aboriginal children from their families and communities. In 1927, George HLF Pitt-Rivers, a British anthropologist, summed up the prevailing view: 'the survival of the natives will only cause trouble'.

The protectionist era yielded the second wave of language death. Hundreds of Aboriginal people from different language groups and clans were thrown together in single missions, where the use of traditional languages was usually banned. For children, this sometimes meant the loss of their mother tongue(s); Aboriginal languages were replaced by English or, for those in the NT, by the development of Kriol, a new language combining aspects of English and multiple Aboriginal languages. As with other settler states, such as Canada and New Zealand, Australia's official response to the 'Aboriginal problem' was to destroy the Aboriginal-ness of Aboriginal people – including their languages.

Aboriginal people opposed and resisted these policies, as did a small minority of white settlers. As Aboriginal historian John Maynard writes, 'Resistance has taken many forms since 1770, from small encounters, to guerilla warfare, open warfare and the war of words.' Maynard argues that the Aborigines Progressive Association, formed in 1937, can be seen as the beginning of the contemporary Aboriginal street activist movement. However, it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that land rights and self-determination were put on the agenda in a significant way.

One part of this story concerns us here. A flow-on of the rights won in this era – limited though they were – was the revival of remote Aboriginal communities. For the first time, communities were afforded some degree of self-management. An extremely important

outcome of this development was increased focus on education. On one level, this push was driven by the view that education would provide 'opportunities' previously denied to Aboriginal people. But there was also another dimension to it: schools were recognised



as sites where Aboriginal languages and cultural traditions could be rediscovered, continued and enriched. It was an opportunity to make schools Aboriginal places for Aboriginal people. For a lot of communities, bilingual education was high on the agenda.

Not only does it make intuitive sense that one will find it easier to learn to read a language they already speak, it is also beyond doubt in the research. There is almost total consensus on the value of bilingual education in developing initial literacy (and brain research suggests, though with much less certainty, other benefits for bi- and multilingual people). There is also strong evidence that the imposition of a language-of-dominance (in this case, English) through schooling can produce or exacerbate language death, meaning the use of languages in schools is extremely important for their survival.

Brian Devlin, a historian of NT bilingual education, writes about a 'flourishing' of Aboriginal languages and linguistic work in northern Australia from the late 1970s. Communities began to develop their languages into written ones with standardised

orthographies. For many, English was considered necessary for engaging with wider society, and for increasing Aboriginal power in situations like land rights negotiations, but this did not lessen the need to teach Aboriginal languages.

Bilingual schools, along with other community initiatives, were able to make great strides in reviving Aboriginal languages, despite immense difficulties. Amid the colonial legacy of generational poverty, chronic underfunding and endemic health issues, schools in over twenty-five communities began to produce bi- and multilingual students, and to generate rich literature in local languages. Mandawuy Yunupingu, famous for his band Yothu Yindi, helped develop the 'Aboriginalisation plan' for the school at Yirrkala because, as he wrote in 1999, 'issues to do with curriculum, teaching, learning and literacy are all about power'.

It was for the same reason that the heyday of bilingual education was, for most communities, short-lived. Bilingual education is dependent on community control, self-determination and the provision of decent government funding to raise living standards – things that successive Australian governments have failed to deliver. And so bilingual education has found itself in the crosshairs from the moment it was implemented.

But since the NT Intervention, it is not just bilingual education that is under threat – entire communities in which it takes place have a very uncertain future.

Today's neo-assimilationist consensus has its roots in the backlash against self-determination. In some quarters, most notably *Quadrant*, the Bennelong Society and the Centre for Independent Studies, people have explicitly advocated for assimilationist 'solutions'. Such calls have been endorsed by influential figures like Noel Pearson, Warren Mundine, Jacinta Price, Helen Hughes,

Marcia Langton and most Indigenous Affairs writers in *The Australian*, who have pushed the idea that self-determination – in their view driven by the left – is the obstacle to Indigenous advancement.

It is here we find the origin of ideas like welfare being 'sit-down money': government 'handouts', the argument goes, encourage laziness and social dysfunction. According to this logic, social issues in communities are not a question of injustice and inequality, but of Aboriginal people's own failures. In one of his earliest essays developing this argument, Pearson condemned the idea that colonial history and structural racism can be blamed for Aboriginal disadvantage, arguing instead that a lack of Aboriginal responsibility is the problem:

My view is that the main reason why people have refused (and still refuse) to talk about responsibility is not for strong strategic reasons, but because they actually believe that better health and better education and better housing and better life expectancy and better survival of traditional languages are rights that can be enjoyed if other people – specifically governments, but also the wider society – take the necessary actions to make them materialise.

This, along with a confected crisis of sexual abuse in remote communities, was the justification for the NT Intervention when it was so dramatically imposed in July 2007. While many remember the shock and awe of seeing the army move into remote communities, few can comprehend the degree of devastation inflicted. The NT Intervention also involved the more permanently disabling acts of seizing community assets and sacking thousands of Aboriginal workers who provided community support through the Community Development Employment

Program. The system of control established has been near total. As Paddy Gibson wrote in 2012:

The Intervention has established a twenty-first-century Aboriginal welfare board. The 'patrol officers' have returned. A network of live-in government managers stretch across bush communities, in cyclone-fenced compounds. Income management serves as the new ration system, controlling Aboriginal spending and movement. Police have also been given special powers of surveillance and control that hark back to the welfare era. Race-based legislation ensures communities are restricted from access to the vices of modern society, 'for their own good'. Under the Intervention and now Stronger Futures, the two groups of people in Australia not allowed access to pornography, violent video games or alcohol are those under the age of eighteen and those living in 'prescribed communities' in the Northern Territory – the legislative embodiment of paternalism.

The Intervention is a marriage of traditional assimilationist policies and the neoliberal economic agenda. Its emphasis is on individual empowerment via market uplift; if an individual is unwilling to cooperate, the state will impose its agenda through force. In this ideological framing, the 'value' of remote communities is based on their ability to attract private investment and encourage individual home ownership. Thus state investment becomes determined by the potential for economic growth. If communities cannot survive this zero-sum game, they are left to rot.

Bizarrely, Australia's richest people have been called in as advisors and experts. Mining magnate Andrew Forrest, famous for tax evasion, is one such cashed-up saviour. His proposal of a cashless welfare card, modelled

on the BasicsCard of the NT Intervention, has been rolled out in a few trial communities. It quarantines 80 per cent of Centrelink benefits onto a card that cannot be used to buy alcohol.

Forrest also headed the recent government review into Indigenous employment, commissioned by Tony Abbott. Government support for job creation, often cited as a goal for Intervention-style policies, is contingent on those jobs meeting the wider priorities of the mainstream economy. It is little surprise, then, that the Forrest Review advocates for Aboriginal people to move off remote lands and accept jobs in industries like mining, tourism and retail in large centres, regardless of what it means for remote communities.

These 'mainstreaming' policies have led to the re-emergence of the idea that Aboriginal languages are not suitable for education and that Aboriginal people should assimilate into the dominant English-speaking culture – whether it is their desire to or not. The loss of community control under the Intervention was compounded by a loss of control over the language of instruction.

The NT government took a dramatic decision shortly after the announcement of the Intervention: then NT education minister Marion Scrymgour announced a ban on the use of Indigenous languages in schools for the first four hours of the day (it swiftly became known as 'First Four Hours').

A subsequent report by the Australian Education Union (AEU) found that NT schools were not suffering because of bilingual education, but rather because communities did not have adequate resources, teachers or infrastructure. They estimated \$1.7 billion was needed to provide a decent education for all Aboriginal children in the NT. Even the report used to justify the Intervention, *Little Children are Sacred*, recognises that teaching children in appropriate traditional languages boosts school attendance.

The NT government later insisted the 'First Four Hours' was misunderstood and there was not a complete ban on Aboriginal languages. The policy was quietly abandoned in 2012, but much of the damage had already been done – many schools had by that stage lost their bilingual programs.

The only reason that some bilingual schools survived was because communities put up a fight. The community in Yirrkala decided to ignore the plans and their schools persisted with a bilingual program, while a school at Areyonga launched a legal challenge under the *Racial Discrimination Act*.

The logic behind 'four hours of English' continues, just in other forms. Bruce Wilson's 2013 review of Indigenous education in the NT, *A Share in the Future*, declared that it 'does not support continued efforts to use bilit-eracy approaches, or to teach the content of the curriculum through first languages other than English'. The Wilson review is also notable because of its acceptance of the discourse of dysfunction in relation to remote communities, and its argument that secondary schooling in remote communities cannot be funded. English is positioned as the ultimate attainment, while the overall goal of education is participation in the market economy:

The review focuses on the English language skills and knowledge that underpin success in the western education system and proposes that these are gained through rigorous and relentless attention to the foundations of the language and the skills that support participation in a modern democracy and economy.

While the NT's new Labor government has made noises about supporting existing programs, there has been no clear indication it intends to redevelop what has been lost. It also remains to be seen what they will do with the Country Liberal Party's policy of

closing down remote high schools in favour of boarding schools.

Then there is the federal attitude. In partnership with Noel Pearson's Good to Great Schools program, and with funding from the federal government, around forty schools across northern Australia have implemented, or are in the process of implementing, a program called Direct Instruction (DI), a repetition-based teaching method taught in English. The program has a 'culture' component for language, but this happens outside of school hours. The national institution of DI appears to be going ahead despite a crisis at Good to Great's Aurukun school, which resulted in a Queensland government takeover. Pearson eventually stepped down amid scandals over school safety, his management style and questions over where exactly millions of dollars have gone.

Writing in *Arena*, Aboriginal educator Chris Sarra notes how DI is reminiscent of 1950s approaches to education and mission-era discipline:

[W]e can see that it is based on ideas that were inflicted upon Aboriginal people during the mission days of the last century. Anyone who understands education and teaching methods will know that the methods prescribed by the Direct Instruction product, which has cost Australian taxpayers \$30 million, resemble a style of teaching from the 1950s. The teacher reads a prescribed American script and children respond like parrots by repeating what the teacher has just said.

Meanwhile, the WA government is sitting on its plans to close down communities that Premier Colin Barnett has described as 'not viable ... not sustainable'. The state government's decision followed a federal move to devolve funding responsibility for remote

Aboriginal communities. A recent WA government report commits to some role for Indigenous languages in education, but as yet there has been no announcement on which communities will receive funding.

Aboriginal self-determination is offhandedly associated with poor social outcomes. A continuing theme in approaches to Aboriginal politics, languages and education – and, indeed, to Aboriginal existence itself – is the idea that Aboriginal people ought to subordinate their existence as Indigenous people to make way for the demands of the Australian settler state. At best, there is no value assigned to Aboriginal languages and culture; at worst, they are blamed for Aboriginal disadvantage, and their practice continually undermined.

The NSW government has announced plans to protect Aboriginal languages with legalisation, and mining giant Rio Tinto is even funding some programs. But such gestures are more affordable politically because they are not associated with living languages and concrete questions of self-determination – instead, they are framed as *revitalisation*. And they are economically affordable because they consist largely of projects run by small groups of mostly volunteers with very few resources. Notably, the minister has referred to NSW's languages as 'part of our heritage' – in this view, the languages are a museum piece, not a living question.

Antonio Gramsci (who studied linguistics) saw the linguistic unification of Italy in the early twentieth century as a metaphor for the spread of capitalist market relations. Like other linguistics of the era, he noted the tendency of the modern capitalist nation state towards monolingualism. For him, questions of language were never *just* about language:

Every time that the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming

to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish more intimate and secure relationships between the governing groups and the national-popular mass.

It is important not to overstate the way that language shapes our worldview. We create language, rather than the other way around. Yet what is lost when a language dies is more than just a linguistic curiosity; a community's history and ways of viewing the world are lost with it. Losing your mother tongue through the forced imposition of a dominant language is disempowering, at least partly because it is an attempt to reshape your identity to suit someone other than yourself. Or, in the words of one remote NT school's submission to a 1999 review into bilingual education:

We think that no one in the Education Department has read our reports because now you are paying people to come and ask us what we want again. Every year you ask us and every year we tell you but you don't listen to what we say. Some community members say that you will keep asking until we tell you that we want to be Balanda, then you'll stop asking. We are not Balanda, our skin will always be black.

1. Most linguists argue for Yolŋu to be recognised as six separate languages, each with its own varieties and dialects.
2. This figure does not include 'contact' languages such as Kriol and Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole), which appear to have growing numbers of speakers.
3. Recently, Bruce Pascoe has prompted a re-opening of the discussion over whether pre-colonisation Aboriginal societies can be better understood as hunter-gatherer or as agricultural societies.

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