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Bilingual Education and the Language of News

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This paper presents evidence that shows for the first time that news media influence was a significant factor in the decision to dismantle the Northern Territory's bilingual education policy in 2008. It identifies and discusses five media-related overlays that have affected public discussion and policymaking during the life of the policy. They include the media's role in informing public understanding of the policy; media representation of Indigenous peoples and issues; the relationship between policymaking and journalism in general; neo-liberal discourses about education, especially literacy; and the reporting practices of journalists who have covered the issue. It draws on relevant literature, the history of the policy and interviews conducted for the Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988–2008 *ARC Discovery Project to interpret some of the connections and disconnections between these overlays and bilingual education policy. This analysis suggests that the news media exerted a complex and uneven range of influences on the 2008 decision to dismantle Australia's first and most enduring policy of Indigenous self-determination.*

Keywords: Bilingual Education; Media Influence; First Four Hours in English; Journalism; Indigenous

1. Introduction

The bilingual education policy that operated in some remote communities in the Northern Territory from 1973 was set aside on 14 October 2008, when then Territory Education Minister, Marion Scrymgour, announced via the news media that all instruction would be in English for the first four hours of the school day (Scrymgour 2008a). In the period surrounding the decision, headlines in national news media told the public that 'Aborigines must learn English' (Karvelas 2007), 'Bilingual schools won't be successful' (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2008) and that 'Education apartheid' was 'failing Aboriginal kids' (Ferrari 2008). Academic

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commentators Simpson *et al.* (2009) and policy actors interviewed for the *Australian News Media and Indigenous Policymaking 1988–2008* ARC Discovery Project[1] identified media coverage as a key contributor to the policy's demise.

I argue that an understanding of the intricate interplay between news media and the policy requires us to look beyond viewing neo-assimilationist headlines as racist discourses (e.g. Jakubowicz *et al.* 1994; see also Cottle 2000). Nor is news coverage a simple lever on public opinion that forces policymakers to act (Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten 2010). This paper considers the Northern Territory's bilingual education policy field, and the news media's role within it, as a complex arena with its own characteristics, structures and dynamics (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010). In order to make sense of the news media's role in the bilingual education policymaking process, I identify five overlays that can be observed to affect the relationship between news and the policy, but do not trace the connections and interactions of all these overlays. Instead, I treat these as individual factors to establish a multi-level framework for interpreting the scope and nature of media influence. This approach has parallels to the work of scholars such as Koch-Baumgarten and Voltmer (2010), who suggest that media–policy processes can only be properly investigated through a policy-specific examination that seeks to analyse media influence within such a framework.

The five overlays discussed here are the media's role in building public understanding of the policy; media representation of Indigenous peoples and issues; the relationship between policymaking and journalism in general; neo-liberal discourses about education, especially literacy; and the reporting practices of journalists who have covered the issue. It is argued that examining each overlay can provide some useful insights into the connections and disconnections between particular aspects of news and bilingual education policy and generate some understandings about how these contribute to the ways in which the policy has been represented and shaped. The research approach taken here involves drawing on relevant scholarly literature and the history of the policy, as well as interviews with participants in the policy process. Depth interviewing with individuals is one methodological approach used to access the professional and personal perspectives, viewpoints and knowledge of actors in a particular policy field (Gamson 1992; Herbst 1998; McCallum 2010). Depth interviews were conducted for this paper with journalists, public servants, academics, Indigenous people and language activists. Interview participants shared personal experiences of developing, promoting, influencing and reporting on the bilingual education policy, expressed opinions about the role of the media, and reflected on their own professional practices.

2. The News Media's Role in Informing Public Understanding

There has been relatively little mainstream or media discussion of the Territory's bilingual education programmes during the 30-plus year life of the policy, except

[1] Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP 0987457.

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when it had been made a political issue. This occurred in 1972 when it was announced as Australia's first policy of self-determination by the Whitlam government; in 1998–1999 when it came under attack from the Country Liberal Party government and again in 2007–2008. The lack of public knowledge about the rationale and operation of the programmes meant that when bilingual education became a political issue there was little community interest to influence debate and political decision-making. The need for this was recognized early on. Bilingual education programmes were rolled out in five schools in 1973, and O'Grady and Hale (1974) conducted a review that produced 25 recommendations. They emphasized the need to educate the public about the aims and operation of the bilingual education programme. Recommendation 24 is 'that previous efforts to explain the nature of bilingual education to a wider Australian audience be expanded' and 25: '[t]hat the Department of Education arrange for the production of one or more feature-length films depicting the Bilingual Education program in operation'. This recommendation was followed through by the Whitlam government and in 1975 the short documentary film, *Not to Lose You, My Language* (Reading 1975) was produced and distributed. Teachers and linguists are shown at work with children and community members who discuss what they see as the great benefits and challenges of bilingual education. There is no evidence to suggest further attempts were made by governments to raise public awareness and understanding of this educational approach, which left the public reliant on the occasional media representation of it for their knowledge and understanding of the policy.

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3. Media Representation of Indigenous People and Issues

The second overlay to consider is news media representation of Indigenous people and issues because the bilingual education policy is caught in this lens. As Meadows (2005) observes, journalism has played, and continues to play, a crucial role in 'imagining' Indigenous peoples and their affairs for most non-indigenous people:

> The news media play a significant role—as they have always done—in framing the ways in which we think about issues, especially Indigenous issues, as there are virtually no other sources for most people. (Meadows 2005: 39)

The question of Indigenous media representation is a complex one. There is a wealth of evidence of racist media discourses, but it is also important to recognize there are vibrant Indigenous public spheres and that Indigenous people have had significant agency in shaping public debates on issues that affect them. The Indigenous media sector plays an important role in self-representation and new media forms offer Indigenous people the power to tell their stories to the world without intermediaries (Hartley & McKee 2000; McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012; Mickler 1998). In the mainstream media there are many examples of excellent journalism on Indigenous issues, but racist discourses continue in particular ways. McCallum (2010) argues that the persistent representation of Indigenous violence

and substance abuse has contributed to a discourse of risk and crisis dominating public discussion of Indigenous issues that can have significant effects on policymaking. The capacity of Indigenous people to represent their *own* concerns and interests is seriously compromised by these dominant discourses (McCallum 2010). Indigenous education is often represented through the routine and predictable frames of social disadvantage and failure—both in terms of policy and outcomes for individuals (Pearson 2009). At the height of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention) in 2007–2008, the news media represented Indigenous education in remote Territory communities as being in a state of crisis (Ferrari 2008; Karvelas 2007; Maiden 2008). As the following discussion of the third overlay demonstrates, the 'first four hours in English' policy (Scrymgour 2008a) that resulted is an example of the way media-generated moral panics can have a significant effect on policymaking.

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4. The Relationship between Policy and Media

The third overlay concerns the relationship between policymaking and news media in general. Journalists are under pressure to create attention-grabbing news and operate in a highly competitive field (Bourdieu 1998). This often results in a lack of time and space to draw a complete picture of a topic, or keep track of the exact status of policy issues. Studies have shown that once a policy is enacted, the media lose interest since the early stages of policymaking are more newsworthy and controversial than covering the complex processes of policy implementation (Franklin 1999).

The news media's interest in policymaking is highly uneven due to a number of factors. It is often limited to specific political actions and reactions, while on the other hand, the policy process is so complex and slow that it commands little attention generally (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010). This is true of the Territory's bilingual education policy, which has only been of real media interest when it has been made a political issue. It was a national news story in 1972, when the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, announced it as Australia's first policy of Indigenous self-determination (Whitlam 1972). It received national media attention again in 1998–1999 when the Country Liberal Territory government attempted to scrap the programmes, and then in 2007–2008 when the Labor Territory government introduced its 'first four hours in English' policy. These kinds of media spotlights are short-lived and may therefore not have much impact on public perception of an issue. In policy areas that are more the province of public servants than politicians, and the Territory's bilingual education policy is arguably one of these, Voltmer and Koch-Baumgarten say:

> It is unlikely that the media will take notice of the highly specialized, often esoteric debates going on . . . unless a gross policy failure occurs that has the potential for a full-blown media scandal. (Voltmer & Koch-Baumgarten 2010: 2)

Politicians, bureaucracies and their media departments can be understood as elites at the top of the media chain, which gives them the advantage of shaping issues and presenting them to journalists in a particular light they know will appeal (Berkowitz 1992), while those most affected by the policy often struggle to be heard (Terkildsen *et al.* 1998). Interviews conducted for this study provide evidence of these effects. Media relations sections of education departments have expanded dramatically in the past 20 years and interviewees emphasized how media management has become integral to government business. Journalists interviewed for this research admit they rely heavily on government press releases and media events for news. Time and again, Indigenous people affected by changes to the policy have not been consulted by government or included in the policy process (Devlin 2009; Nicholls 2005). As a result, when they have the media spotlight, their perspective is often framed as 'angry reaction' to dismantling the bilingual education policy. This overshadows their perspectives on the need for these education programmes and their success and value.

According to Schudson, 'the power of the mass media lies not in its direct influence on the general public but in the perception of experts and decision makers that the general public is influenced by mass media' (1995: 20). Adapting to media priorities is a strategy for policymakers to respond to what they believe to be the preferences and demands of the public. This influence can be seen to occur in the minds of politicians who lose their confidence and sacrifice their principles when they come under media attack (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010). The former Chief Executive of the NT Education Department, Margaret Banks, said in an interview for this research that the poor results of the Territory's Indigenous students in the first National Assessment Program—literacy and numeracy—known as the NAPLAN tests, was one of the stated reasons for her sacking just weeks before the 'four hours of English' policy announcement was made. She said the new policy was a hastily thrown-together response to the intense media glare on the Territory's poor NAPLAN results and an attempt to distract media attention from her sacking. She said:

> If you look, the media was actually the trigger behind all that policy change to go from bilingual to a four hour, full-on English experience . . . it was the national publication of results—the Northern Territory's need to respond. To look like they were on top of this and handling it, so there I was part of the policy reform and also the announcement. It was a matter of a couple of weeks, so it was part of that roll-out of responsiveness to the media, but I don't think the media actually had a role in shaping a well-constructed policy. There was no well-constructed policy response as far as I could see. And nor has there been. It's just sort of almost a kneejerk response.

Journalists prefer to see themselves as watchdogs on political powerbrokers, but much of the time the relationship is more collaborative than adversarial (Protess *et al.* 1985). Davis (2007) presents another perspective on this relationship when he says that politicians seek out journalists who hold similar views to enlist their support for a particular initiative, or to launch an attack on opponents. As a result, policymakers

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and journalists, especially the elites in both camps, can be seen as what Zelizer (1993) describes as 'interpretive communities' with each having an impact on the way policy is formulated. As journalists generally do not have this close relationship with Indigenous people, academics or educators, who are often sidelined in the policy process, it is more difficult for these kinds of groups to gain entry to the interpretive community.

Using the media for strategic purposes gives policymakers some control over the way policies are represented, but doing so requires them to accept the media's rules of the game. This can raise the stakes for policymakers as a gaffe, leaked information or a poorly timed public statement can damage not only a policy proposal but also a political career (Koch-Baumgarten & Voltmer 2010). For example, former Education Minister, Marion Scrymgour, spoke out strongly in the media against the Intervention (Scrymgour 2007) and was admonished by her federal and Territory Labor peers. Simpson *et al.* (2009) suggest the reprimand may have made her more cautious in opposing policies supported by the Labor Party and the news media, and encouraged her to take policy directions that fitted Labor's national policy framework—such as its new national benchmarks for literacy and numeracy.

Having access to the media allows political actors to assert their interests. Public perceptions can change because the media can give voice to outsider or minority interests (Bakir 2006). In 1998–1999, when the CLP government tried to dismantle the bilingual programmes, Indigenous people and their supporters were successful in preventing the complete loss of the programmes through their efforts to garner media and public support (McCallum, Waller & Meadows 2012). At Yirrkala in North-East Arhnem Land, an Indigenous media consultant was hired by Yolngu to co-ordinate a media campaign. As a result of these kinds of efforts a number of news items and features highlighted the benefits of bilingual education and Indigenous peoples' right for their children to receive an education in their own languages. The 'Two-Way Learning' policy that followed can be understood as a back-down to accommodate this position (Nicholls 2001).

5. Neo-liberal Discourses on Education

It has only been in recent times that a small but growing group of international education and media scholars has begun to explore the complex role of the news media in education policy (cf. Gerstl-Pepin 2007; Lingard & Rawolle 2004; Stack 2007; Thomas 2005). These scholars point to a neo-liberal media discourse that permeates discussion of education. This is the fourth overlay that needs to be considered in order to understand the news media's role in the bilingual education policy process. Neo-liberalism's strategy is one of simplification. It is understood to operate through 'hegemony'(Couldry 2010), Gramsci's (1971) term for how the dominant culture tries to fix the meaning of signs, symbols and representations to provide a 'common' or 'commonsense' world view which disguises relations of power

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and privilege. This is achieved through social institutions including the media, state bodies such as schools, as well as government institutions and bureaucracies.

Gutierrez *et al.* (2002) make links between politics, language, race and education in constructing problems for policy. They examine how bilingual education programmes for Spanish speakers in California were said to have failed, and draw on feminist scholarship and critical race theory to show 'how whiteness, or the status quo camouflaged as colour-blind, becomes the uncontested baseline of educational reform' (Gutierrez *et al.* 2002: 336). Gutierrez *et al.* argue that the neo-liberal backlash involves an attempt to overturn victories made not only by women, but social movements such as trade unions and Indigenous peoples. The insidious nature of this political manoeuvre can be seen in the way it casts these social movements as the cause of contemporary individual hardships. In the Territory's bilingual education context this has taken the form of blaming the community's desire for children to learn to read and write in their own languages as the cause of perceived 'failure' (Karvelas 2007). This approach ignores the lack of government support and under-resourcing of teaching and infrastructure, despite these being identified again and again in reports and academic literature as contributing causes of underachievement in the Territory's bilingual education programmes (cf. Collins 1999; Hoogenraad 2001; Kronemann 2007; Nicholls 1994).

According to Gutierrez *et al.* (2002), race used to be the state's main device for categorizing students and marginalizing those who did not belong to the dominant group. They argue that in the current political climate, language and ability have become surrogates for the larger category of race:

> The key device is to reframe the project using code words, phrases, and symbols which refer indirectly to racial themes, but do not directly challenge popular democratic or egalitarian ideas, such as justice and equal opportunity. . . . For example, these various initiatives never mentioned race or racism directly, but instead proposed these changes as sound and fair-minded public policy leading ultimately to economic development through the most efficient economic means. (Gutierrez *et al.* 2002: 340)

These insights resonate with the Northern Territory Government's 2008 announcement that the first four hours of school would be conducted in English (Scrymgour 2008a). As English was the language of instruction in all Territory schools except the handful of remote Indigenous schools running bilingual programmes, they were the only ones to be affected by the policy. However, these schools and bilingual education were not mentioned directly in the minister's media statement (Wilkins 2008). The policy is made palatable for the assumed white mainstream media audience by presenting the commonsense proposition that learning in English will make all Indigenous students more 'equal' and give them better opportunities to participate in the mainstream economy (Scrymgour 2008b).

Neo-liberal policy actors in Australia are increasingly doing their policy work through selected parts of the media to stifle progressive approaches to education,

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according to Hattam *et al.* (2009). Their case study reveals the tactics of an Australian federal minister for education and a conservative media commentator in spinning education policy and argues that the media's infiltration of the policy process is not only due to growth in the size and influence of government media departments, and how policy actors attempt to set the news agenda, it is also about how the media has an increasingly active role in the education policy process.

On the national stage in 2007, criticism of the use of Indigenous languages in school was beginning to build through the media. Conservative politicians and commentators began a 'commonsense' call for learning in English. The influential director of the Cape York Institute, Noel Pearson, argued strongly for official recognition of Indigenous languages, but claimed that initial literacy in the vernacular sets back literacy in English:

> Schools are not the places for cultural and linguistic transmission, and we must stop looking to schools to save our languages. This is because the primary purpose of schools is for our children to obtain a mainstream, Western education, including full fluency in English. . . . Communities that delay the learning of English to late in primary school in favour of traditional languages in the early years, end up disabling their children because they remain far behind in the language required for them to obtain a mainstream education. (Pearson 2007: 28)

Then Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, entered the public discussion with a focus on low school attendance. In a 2007 interview with *The Australian* (Karvelas 2007), he said that English language skills were poor in remote communities because people refused to learn English and wanted Indigenous languages taught in schools instead. He admitted to basing his opinion not on figures or research but on his personal experience of visiting communities (Karvelas 2007).

The news media could be seen to make choices about which side of the debate would be given most weight in public discussion, virtually ignoring a 2007 review by the Australian Education Union (Kronemann 2007) of the needs for Indigenous education in the Territory, which supported the continuation of bilingual programmes but called for much greater investment in teaching and infrastructure resources. However, some media outlets gave considerable coverage to Hughes (2008), a monograph written by the economist for the conservative think tank, the Centre for Independent Studies. Hughes asserts that teaching in the vernacular is a major cause of educational disadvantage.

Thomas (2003, 2005) shows how the news media creates public discourses of crisis in education, privileges particular groups as the authoritative voice on the subject and constructs 'commonsense' understandings of education. In a deeply monolingual country like Australia where neo-assimilationist federal policy dominates current public discussion (Altman & Hinkson 2010), the idea that everyone should reach benchmark standards in English literacy and numeracy at the same year level is a good example of this construction of 'commonsense'. Conservative politicians and

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commentators such as Hughes were positioned as the authoritative voices on the subject, and constructed public discourses on the failure of remote Indigenous education (Simpson *et al.* 2009).

The news media present think tanks as credible sources on education policy despite their different degrees of expertise in the field, according to Haas (2007). The prominence given to Hughes' and Pearson's views on bilingual learning, neither with any expertise in education, is a good example of how the news media embrace this kind of opinion, especially outlets such as *The Australian*, with a well defined ideological agenda on Indigenous issues (Manne 2011) that accords with the views of both these conservative commentators. On the other hand, government keeps a tight control over who within its ranks is allowed to talk to the media, which means that many members of the policy community are never heard through the newspapers or on the air waves. This results in much media coverage of education being very superficial. In the bilingual education context, this means that the people with the most intimate knowledge of the programmes, including Indigenous and non-indigenous teachers and other education department employees, are not permitted to talk to the media or make public comment (Waller 2011b).

Journalism scholar Bob Franklin says British education reporters are pursuing predictable and narrow agendas dominated by reporting school league tables (Franklin 2004), and a similar trend can be detected in Australian education reporting. Devlin (2009, 2010) demonstrates that there was a lack of empirical evidence that schools with bilingual programmes performed worse than equivalent non-bilingual schools in the 2008 NAPLAN tests, as claimed by the minister, but the news media did not question how the tests were conducted, or the results. The academic criticism was not raised in the news until months after the 'first four hours of English' decision was announced. Instead, the news reports followed the predictable and narrow agenda of the NAPLAN league table.

6. Journalists and Newsroom Practices

We turn now to the fifth overlay, which concerns the everyday practices of journalists reporting on remote communities in the Northern Territory. In 2008, when the media took interest in the dismantling of bilingual education, many of the reports that appeared in the southern news media were produced in newsrooms far removed from the Indigenous people most affected by the policy change. Many of these stories were written as straight political pieces with no comments from affected school communities or educators and academics with deep knowledge of the issue (Arup 2008; Adlam 2008; Ferrari 2008).

The reality is that there are very few journalists with more than a couple of years' experience reporting on Indigenous issues in the Northern Territory (Waller 2011a). This means most journalists have little knowledge of the cultures, languages and governance structures of the Territory's Indigenous peoples, or few Indigenous

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contacts. To report well on a subject such as bilingual education requires journalists to have some understanding of Indigenous public spheres (McCallum *et al.* 2012), as well as the ability to critically engage with the policy and pedagogical issues and make sense of the empirical evidence on school performance. Many of the people interviewed for this research commented on this lack of knowledge and understanding and questioned journalists' ability to provide the public with the kind of information needed for well-informed public debate.

Experienced Indigenous Affairs reporters have expressed their frustration at the lack of interest from their newsrooms in Indigenous stories that do not fit the sensational templates of crisis, dysfunction and violence, as well as the pressures of coming up with good vision and stories that fit the production requirements and news values of their organizations (Waller 2011a). One television reporter said:

> The thing about bilingual was . . . if you were to do that story at the time [2008], the last time it blew up, as a television story it would have been incredibly—I can remember wrestling with it you know, but it was an incredibly difficult story for television because at one level it was quite ethereal really because you're talking about high policy and—you know, very academic. It can be reduced to studies—serious research, and that just ain't the stuff that's current affairs really, it's the stuff of good academic argy bargy but it ain't really made for television.

Resourcing, language and weak relationships with Indigenous communities are major issues for journalists—there are relatively large costs associated with travel and engaging interpreters. Unless reporters are pursuing a story that the newsroom thinks has high news value, there is an unwillingness to pay for trips to remote Indigenous communities. Journalists who have been interviewed say they rely on government ministers and Indigenous organizations to take them along when they go to a community. This means they have relatively little time or freedom to pursue their own story ideas as there is an expectation that they will focus on the issue or event on their host's agenda. One newspaper journalist said:

> Media generally don't go out to these places very much. We go when things are happening—ministerial visits, when they declare these big areas open for conservation, I try to get out . . . no one goes out as much as they should . . . there's nowhere to stay, it costs a fortune, so unless it's something that's going to get up on the front page there's not a commitment from the bosses. They're difficult. To go anywhere it's a huge effort.

Yolngu who were interviewed for this study want to be heard by journalists on the subject of bilingual education and they want reporters to go to Yirrkala to investigate the issue properly. At a round table interview one participant said:

> The media's got to go more out to the community and talk to people outside the school a bit more and find out why our school has to put up with things that are unacceptable in Yolngu terms, in Yolngu perspective . . . that's the perspective that needs to be emphasized more.

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7. Conclusions

This paper has identified and examined five news media-related overlays that can be understood to have affected the way the Territory's bilingual education policy has been represented, and it is argued they also had a precise impact on the policymaking process. The news media has been largely mute on the subject of bilingual education in the Territory, except when it has been made a political issue. In 2007–2008 the media represented it as an educational crisis and at the same time asserted the 'commonsense' of neo-liberal politicians and commentators who want all Indigenous children to learn in English. This has resulted, on the one hand, in public awareness and understanding of the educational issue and policy being weak and, on the other, motivated politicians to be seen to act swiftly to address the 'crisis'. This appears to have contributed little to further public discussion and thereby not held politicians accountable to consult widely or develop well-formulated policies. As the former Chief Executive of the Northern Territory Education Department, Margaret Banks, said, the media coverage in 2007–2008 had a strong impact on politicians, but did not contribute to the formulation of good policy. So the question remains, how can public discussion of bilingual education be improved and make a positive contribution to democratic processes? Jeffs (in Franklin 1999) argues that education is such a fundamental aspect of human society that discussion will have to move on, even if it means finding other channels than the mainstream media for this to take place:

> A healthy system requires us to create ways which enable such topics to be constantly discussed and revisited; for dialogue to develop in which the greatest number might thoughtfully engage. Our present structures make that virtually impossible. Politicians determined to stifle debate and manage events for short-term electoral advantage, combined with a news media which are run on the cheap (and therefore ever more dependent on pre-packaged news) . . . militate against such debates taking place. Yet they will inevitably surface because they are too important to remain stifled for long . . . if the existing media will not help those debates to flourish then new alternative ways will undoubtedly be found. (Franklin 1999: 212)

A wide and well-informed public discussion of Indigenous languages in education took place in 2011–12 through the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs inquiry into Indigenous Languages in Education. Its report 'Our Land, Our Languages (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs) gives strong endorsement to the value of the Territory's bilingual programs. Margaret Banks expressed her belief that the 2008 decision to dismantle bilingual education would not be the end of the policy debate. She said that at the time of the decision she 'felt quite sad, and I particularly knew how people from Yirrkala would have felt, but they have such spirit it remains to be seen whether it is dead'. Her prediction was accurate as Yolngu have been successful in their campaign for the reinstatement of the bilingual education program in their school. The Country

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Liberal Party (CLP), led by Terry Mills, was elected in the Northern Territory elections in October 2012 with a commitment to bring back bilingual education in remote communities that want it.

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