MINISTER WYATT

Opening statement
Panel discussion on Indigenous languages

Palais de Nations, Geneva

Wednesday 18 September 2019, 16:00–18:00

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In West Australian Noongar language, I say kaya wangju – hello and welcome.

Australia welcomes the International Year of Indigenous Languages and the focus this past year has brought to Indigenous languages.

Those present at this session today would be aware of the statistics about Indigenous languages:

- 96 per cent of the world’s 6,700 languages are spoken by only three per cent of the world’s population.

- Indigenous people comprise less than six per cent of the global population, but speak more than 4,000 of the world’s languages.
Language is more than a mere tool for communicating with other people. People don’t simply speak words. We connect, teach and exchange ideals. Indigenous languages allows each of us to express our unique perspective on the world we live in and with the people with which we share it.

Unique words and expressions within language, even absence of, or taboos on certain words, provide invaluable insight to the culture and values each of us speaks.

Our Language empowers us.

It is a fundamental right to speak your own language, and use it to express your identity, your culture and your history. For Indigenous peoples it lets us communicate our philosophies and our rights as they are within us, and have been for our people.
It is in the everyday lives of people who are speaking their own language that a difference can be felt.

In Australia, we are investing in maintaining the knowledge of languages being spoken today, and preserving this resource for younger people, as one way for future generations to connect with their identity, culture and heritage.

We have around 250 original Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. Sadly only about half of these are still spoken today. Even more upsetting is that of these, only 13 are considered strong. This places Australia as one of the world’s top five hot spots for endangered languages.
To address this we are partnering with Indigenous Australians to revitalise languages that are in danger.

We recognise that cultural authority, community control and engagement are paramount to preserving and revitalising Australia’s first languages. This is why the Australian Government insists it’s the first people, our Indigenous voices, that are heard when we develop policies, programs and services around Indigenous languages.

To support this work we are undertaking a comprehensive survey to inform us on the current state of the proficiency and frequency of use for languages.

We are also keeping language alive, vibrant and accessible.
Australia has over 20 Indigenous community-led language and arts centres. These centres contribute to strong cultural identities, and community-driven wellbeing activities.

At the national level we’re using modern technology streaming platforms to provide a range of content in language — from children’s stories and cartoons to oral histories and news articles.

IndigiTUBE, which has received Government funding, is such a platform. It is becoming a repository for this content as well as music videos, documentaries and comedy routines.

We encourage community radio stations around the country to share the content, and all Australians to access it at home or through the web.
The other important work we are undertaking is to identify the qualitative links between language and wellbeing factors, such as resilience, prosperity and health.

As everyone here using an interpreter would appreciate, interpreter services are critical to ensuring effective engagement and providing equal access to information. This access is vital to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can engage with government services and enjoy the same opportunities to participate as every other Australian.

With more accurate data on languages and understanding the links to improving life outcomes, we can help both Indigenous Australians and governments prioritise our work in preserving and revitalising languages, and understand the
imperatives of incorporating language into government services.

As we say in Noongar:

“Ngyung moort ngarla moort, ngyung boodja ngarla boodja”

My people our people, my country our country.

At all levels, on all platforms we should be making our languages heard and kept. While we acknowledge that much has been lost, it is not too late to preserve and use Indigenous languages – which I hope is the outcome of the International Year.

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