# Translating and Interpreting in Australia: a profession, a craft, an Industry or a service?

Presented in Melbourne on 10 November 2001 by **David Page**, P.S.M.

## Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

It is a rare pleasure to address an audience of people who are professionally skilled at listening and comprehending the spoken word and are equally expert at appreciating the nuances of verbalised language. A pleasure tinged with awe, given the presence of so many distinguished practitioners who know my subject matter better than I do and who bring many different perspectives to the issues I will highlight.

## Jill Blewett's contribution

I am grateful for the opportunity to present the AUSIT Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture for the year 2001. It is both an honour and a challenge to do honour to Jill's considerable reputation as an advocate, educator and pioneer of interpreting and translating in Australia. I met Jill in her role as a director of NAATI some time after she was appointed in 1983 and knew her all too briefly. I represented the Department at the memorable ceremony in celebration of her life that followed her untimely death in October 1988.

Others are more competent than I am to recognise the indelible marks Jill left on the profession she loved. Nothing I say now can add to the tributes paid to her in past memorials. Rather I want to describe the current translating and interpreting landscape, scan the horizon and sharpen the focus on some features that perhaps would surprise or even disappoint Jill Blewett.

As may already be evident, my perspective is not that of an interpreter or translator, practitioner or linguist but more that of a client - or at least of an administrator who from time to time has had more or less direct responsibility for the provision of interpreting and translating services. For three years before my retirement six months ago, I was the Commonwealth member of NAATI. I know you will realise that the views I express now are my own and have no official status. After 20 years and more of trying to find solutions – often it seemed seeking answers to the wrong set of questions – I now enjoy the luxury of posing questions for others to resolve.

Until his retirement in March 2001 as Assistant Secretary of the Settlement Branch of the Immigration Department in Canberra, **David Page** was actively engaged in most of the strategic developments affecting post-arrival programs and services in Australia over the past two decades. He was closely associated with the evolution of the Commonwealth Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) – in fact he wrote the news release that launched the service in 1973 and helped to consolidate its unique features through the 1980s. Eventually he redefined its role as a self-funding facility helping English-speaking service deliverers to communicate with non-English speaking clients. During the 1990s he also served as the Commonwealth Member of the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI).

Formerly a journalist, Mr Page became at different times head of the Public Relations Branch of the Immigration Department (now DIMIA), its State Director in South Australia, and manager of its overseas operations. This experience has given him a wider view of how settlement fits within the global responsibilities of DIMIA.

He was drawn into the planning and delivery of the 1999 Kosovar and East Timorese safe haven operations, and has undertaken special tasks including the development of a self-regulation model for the interpreting and translating industry. He was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1999 for his contribution to migrant and settlement policy.

So a word of caution: things always take much longer than any lecturer supposes or any theoretical model assumes. That is especially so in public administration when changes of executive, changes of minister, changes of government, all can lead to changes of priority to reflect new perceptions of need and create an environment of almost perpetual review. Real change requires very long lead-times.

In my experience, one of the greatest barriers to reform is the misreading of history. As my favourite historian AJP Taylor said, "They tried to learn from history – and as usual learnt the wrong lesson". The problem is that today's "history" is often yesterday's politically-correct propaganda. So I want to go back to basics and

expose a few myths and misconceptions that cloud a clear view of the future of interpreting and translating in this country. What is the current state of the art?

The present disposition of interpreting and translating resources within Australia is not the result of a blueprint or in the current jargon a business case and a plan. They do not flow from supply and demand or any other application of the rules of the market. Rather they are the accretion of incremental decisions that are characteristic of democratically-elected governments whose priorities must change to accommodate shifts of political interest. Despite emphasis on "outputs" and "outcomes" the processes of government, especially links between governments within a regionalised federation, ensure that microscopic attention continues to be given to inputs.

## Changes in the T&I landscape

Of all the changes that have occurred over the past decade or so, I think Jill would be most surprised at the pervasive effect of the application of the user-pays principle to services once promoted as "free", meaning "at no cost to the end users". Like all of us, she would be surprised by the incessant impact of technological change and what that means for optimal use of human beings in service delivery. She would be surprised also at the diversification and even fragmentation of services in a field that was once virtually a Commonwealth monopoly, funded by the Department of Immigration through several manifestations of the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS). She may be disappointed that skills she thought would contribute to the development of an autonomous profession are largely subsumed within the structure of a government funded service industry. Perhaps that applies more to interpreting than to translating. She certainly would be disappointed to learn that the specific skills of translators and interpreters continue to be confused with other language-based services such as bilingual information delivery.

## User pays

Application of the user-pays principle has changed the way translating and interpreting are valued. This can be seen most clearly from the way in which the concept of "free" service has changed in the past couple of years to the more accurate description "fee-free". Even better descriptions would be "fee-exempt" or "fee-waived". Through the 70s and 80s, TIS used to be regarded as providing "free" services. In reality, that meant

receiving a fixed allocation from the Federal budget and rationing expenditure throughout the year. Occasionally money ran out and embarrassed officials had to seek a top-up from government. More often supply exactly matched demand because the method of "first-come, first served" ignores unmet need or what might be called *actual* demand.

There were some unforeseen effects as partial cost recovery was introduced from the late 1980s onwards. First TIS staff, told to be "client-oriented", began to chase business, raising questions about whether a heavily subsidised government-funded service should seek to compete with a fragile private sector. In any case, TIS gave more attention and better service to the relatively small number of paying customers than to "free" services. That began to change as State and Territory governments reluctantly agreed to pay interpreting costs for people seeking to access State and Territory funded services.

Thus emerged the understanding that is now blindingly obvious: translating and interpreting are means to other ends, services essential to the delivery of another primary service. Commonwealth, State and Territory agencies became TIS clients and clients of those agencies (or in more recent jargon "customers") became "end-users". Individuals and community organisations, however, remained eligible for "free" services under a so-called Community Service Obligation (CSO) that was imposed on TIS just as it was being imposed on other government enterprises like Qantas and Telecom that were not then fully privatised. The idea of a Community Service Obligation is that profits are reduced so as to subsidise services to the less profitable segments of a market. First you had to make a profit. TIS in fact remained heavily budget-dependent, first on the Federal Budget and

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later on the internal Department of Immigration budget or running costs. For several years, the CSO cost remained mysteriously stable at $3m of $21m reducing to $18m annually, although the real cost of delivering "free" services was nearer $6m. In other words, supply continued to be limited by rationing while the actual costs were hidden by an unrevealed subsidy. This situation prevailed while the Department sought to discover whether TIS was a viable business or had a business potential that some other agency may be

better equipped to deliver in Australia of the 21st century. In that case, the Department would become a customer, a purchaser rather than a provider of translating and interpreting services. But who wants to run a business where you have to find $6m a year before you start to break even?

Thinking about the purchaser-provider relationship triggered a further thought. Again with hindsight, it becomes blindingly obvious. What if there was a Commonwealth provider other than DIMA? Of course the Department would have to buy back services it currently buys from TIS – such as interpreting required for detention, compliance and enforcement operations. And if the "free" service TIS delivers as a Community Service Obligation is actually a settlement service, then perhaps it should be costed as a settlement service and

purchased from TIS. Hence, since July 2000 Settlement Branch – the Branch I headed – had policy responsibility for deciding who was eligible for "fee-free". From July 2001 the same Branch became directly accountable for the "fee-free" budget. The results were interesting. For a start there was instant confirmation that the CSO delivered an essential ancillary to health services, mainly as high-cost on-site interpreting for medical practitioners in private practice.

**Table 1a** shows total volume and distribution of TIS services in 1998-2001 and Table 1b makes the contrast over the past decade. Tables 2 and 3 show the contrast with the volume and distribution of "fee-free" or so-called CSO services.

### Table 1a -TIS outputs

|  | 1998-99 | 1999-00 | 2000-01 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Telephone | 189589 | 192,041 | 264, 572 |
| On-site | 75388 | 83,718 | 78, 481 |
| Translations docs | 20913 | 19,908 | 15,825 |

Source: TIS DIMA

**Table 1b** shows how the volume of work is distributed numerically

|  | 1992-3 | 1999-2000 | 2000-01 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Translations** | 9.7m words | 19,908 documents | 15,825 documents |
| **Telephone tasks** | 300,000 | 192,041 | 264, 572 |
| **On-site tasks** | 77 000 | 83,718 | 78, 481 |

Source: DIMA

Table 2

**Table 2a**

### Number of Settlement Clients by Policy Category

- Parliamentarian 46
- Trade Union 23
- Local Government 146
- Non-government organisations 764
- Other 10
- Doctors 3319
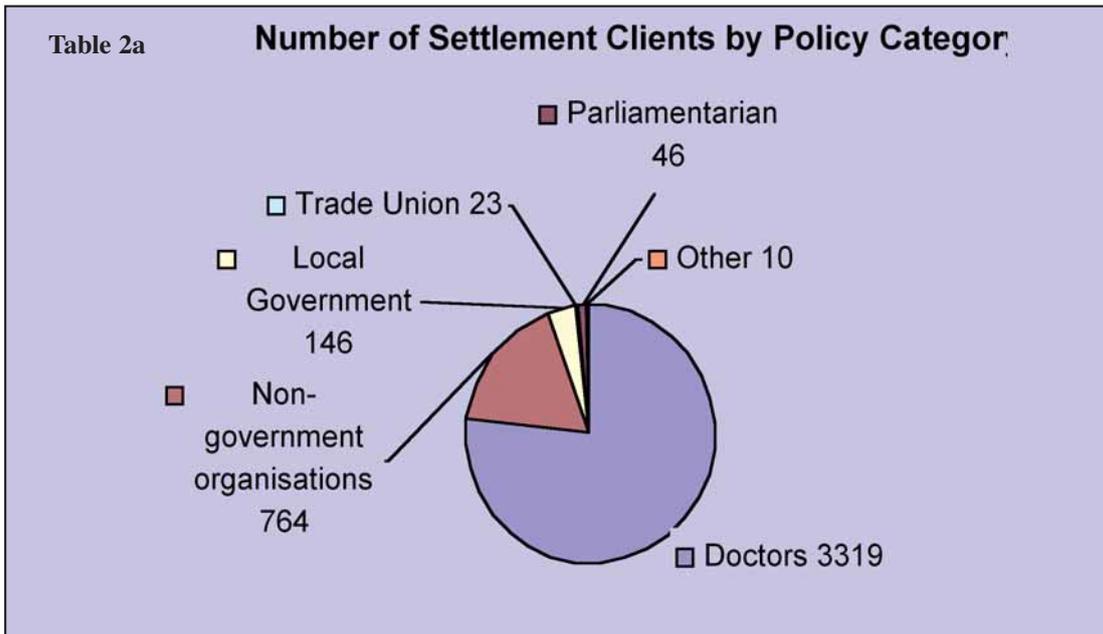
Remarkably, I think, the figures show that of 264,572 telephone transactions, only 30,250 were helping people eligible for fee-free services. Of 78,481 on-site transactions only 24,140 were fee-free and of 15,825 translations only 5,978 were for individuals needing documents for settlement purposes. Putting that another way, on-site interpreting represented 40 per cent of all fee-free services but 66 per cent of the cost. Telephone interpreting accounted for 50 per cent of total fee free services but only 19 per cent of the cost. The comparable figures for translations were 10 per cent and 15 per cent. Obviously telephone interpreting is more cost-efficient than on-site interpreting – although of course not an adequate substitute.

With the cost of an on-site job averaging $152.40 while a telephone job costs $34.80 on average, we need to be sure that particular circumstances really do justify the on-site costs. That is so, even when, as Table 4 shows, the bulk of fee-free interpreting on site is for medical practitioners in private practice. During 2000-01, doctors used 36 per cent of fee-free services but 43 per cent of the budget. Conversely non-government organisations (NGOs) used 45 per cent of services at a cost of 38 per cent of the total allocation. The difference is in use of telephone and on-site. Doctors used on-site on 16,229 occasions compared with 8,598 by NGOs while NGOs used 20,151 telephone assignments compared with 6,189 for doctors.

These illustrations show that the user-pays principle has not had much effect for individual non-English speakers requiring access to services. Rather its application has forced the revelation of the true cost of service delivery, including translating and interpreting components. A valuable by-product of that is to reinforce understanding that translators and interpreters are intermediaries bringing together two clients. As much as a service to non-English speakers, TIS now sees itself as a service enabling other service providers to meet their obligations to the linguistically and culturally diverse population of Australia. Along with that goes a strategy of urging Commonwealth and other funding bodies to include interpreting and translating costs in any outsourcing arrangements, including grants to community organisations.

### Diversification of service delivery: the industry

A less direct effect of user pays was the breaking of the TIS "monopoly" in the early 1990s, and with it economies of scale that are unavailable to TIS today. Along with user pays and full or partial cost-recovery, the Department of Finance advocated, and successfully imposed, the principle of competition. To enable agencies to buy back service from TIS or find alternative providers if they chose, TIS was required to distribute funds equalling whatever each agency had spent in the previous 12 months.

Reactions were mixed. Some agencies, such as the Family Court, complained immediately that their allocation was not enough; they were oblivious to the fact that the amount equalled what they had spent in

the previous year. Other agencies, notably the Department of Social Security, moved to increase their in-house capacity later making it available to other agencies. Arising from that response, Centrelink now handles in-house much of the business TIS used to do for Social Security and the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) during the 1980s.

Concurrently state governments that had initiated interpreting services with Commonwealth money flowing from the 1978 Galbally Report moved to protect their own outgoings [1]. In New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory, state government agencies gave preference to state interpreting services, leaving the overflow to TIS. In all cases of course the overflow includes the high cost of after hours service, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania, which had not taken up Galbally funding, are still reliant on TIS; likewise the ACT.

From the point of view of individual practitioners who offer services in "in-demand" languages, this diversification of service provision probably increased opportunities for higher remuneration. From the national perspective, the various forms of cost shifting further reduced the opportunity to maximise effective use of a national resource. That opportunity was foregone anyway, when no state or territory proved willing to contribute to the National Language Service Organisation that the ALP government had proposed as a 1989 election commitment.

## Self-regulation by the industry

If individual practitioners constitute a profession, the combination of service-providers employing professionals can be seen to constitute an industry. For 20 years NAATI promoted the values of a translating and interpreting profession, mainly by setting standards, testing and registering individuals who could meet those standards or accrediting courses which produced qualified professionals. NAATI accreditations since 1977 total 25,037, of which 11,935 have been at the professional (previously level 3 and level 4) and 13,102 at the sub professional (previously levels 1 and 2). With only 49 accreditations at the level of senior conference interpreter and seven at advanced translator level, there may not be the international capacity that some claim for Australia.

The translating and interpreting landscape still bears the marks of its origins - communication aids to people who did not know English. Or to people who did not know English well enough to appear as self-reliant as most English speakers. In a predominantly English-speaking society, recognition of the need for an official translation service pre-dated the large-scale immigration of non-English-speakers that followed World War II. As the Crimes Acts of the day reveal, we felt we needed to know what the enemy or other aliens might be saying about us. Foreign-language newspapers were required to translate their editorials into English. Similar thinking went into various broadcasting acts that banned languages other than English from radio and television airwaves – a highly institutionalised version of the 1950s insult: "Speak English or go back where you came from". When Mamma Lena and other Italian-speakers were defying this proscription in the late 1960s, no one had the courage to prosecute them, opening the way for 2EA, 3EA, community radio such as 3ZZ in Melbourne and eventually for SBS combining both radio and television capacity.

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The need for an official interpreting capacity came with the flow of displaced persons from wartime Europe. The increased demand for translation of immigration publicity and other material intended to prepare prospective migrants for settlement was done in the countries of migrant origin. Initially and for many years the task of interpreting was assigned by default to English speakers who were themselves of non-English speaking background. Arriving with other migrants or refugees they were immediately employed in the processing of later entrants. As time passed the Australian-born children of non-English speakers found themselves in the unenviable position of communicating on behalf of their parents. The failure of this approach was dramatised in the late 1960s by at least 2 deaths in childbirth attributed to the unavailability of interpreters – leading to the establishment in 1973 of the Emergency Telephone Interpreting Service. The pioneers who staffed this service were experienced practitioners but could not be regarded as professionals. Complaints about quality soon proliferated and administrators became conscious of the urgent need to both set standards and provide professional training.

For much of its existence, NAATI has had to struggle against this legacy of pre-existing practice. Hence

its attempts to lift professional standards have been constrained by the interests of long-standing practitioners who could only be accommodated as para- professionals. As we will see when we return to this issue later, accreditations at either professional or para-professional level do not correspond to actual or potential earning capacity.

Its original charter assumed NAATI would become a self-funding autonomous entity.  In fact NAATI remains a public company limited by guarantee and dependent on continuing financial subsidy from contributing governments, and derives its authority from that of the eight Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers who constitute its owners. No other profession in Australia is so managed.  For a long time the board of NAATI, later supported by the executive of AUSIT, sought to underpin the status of a profession with Commonwealth legislation that enforced professional standards and penalised breaches of conduct.  This would have been an unusual role for the Commonwealth. Most professions in Australia are, like engineers and accountants or like law, medicine and nursing, self regulated under State and Territory legislation. Considering options for commercialising TIS, the 1997 TIS Review concluded that:

> There [are] no constitutional difficulties associated with TIS running a telephone service because of

the Commonwealth's telecommunications power, but that its authority to provide on-site interpreting and translations [is] limited to matters that could be linked to a Commonwealth constitutional power [2].

The debate around these issues centred on whether individual practitioners were fully accountable to their clients or whether the duty of care lay with organisations that employed professional contractors. The council of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs closed off the debate in 1998.  They preferred a form of self-regulation that recognises the legal obligations of service- provider organisations instead of directing sanctions only at individual practitioners.  **Diagram 1** illustrates the various obligations.  As **Diagram 2** shows, there should be sufficient safeguards in arrangements between employers and contractors to afford any remedy required by a dissatisfied client.

### An underlying dichotomy: confusion of T&I skills with other language skills/values and with "productive diversity"

A further trend during the 1990s has been to continue confusion between the specific skills of translating and interpreting and the different skills of bilingual counselling or information-giving of the kind
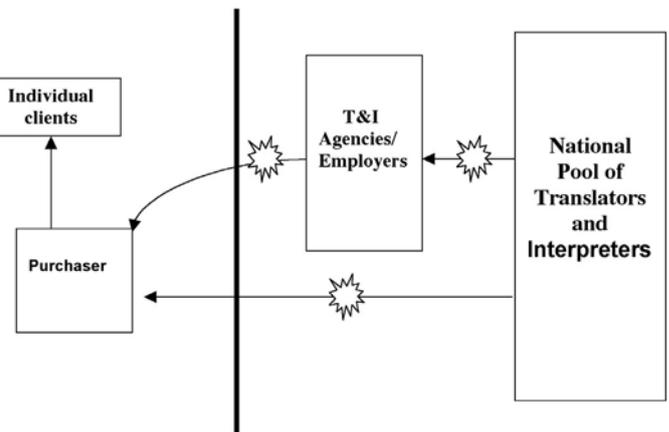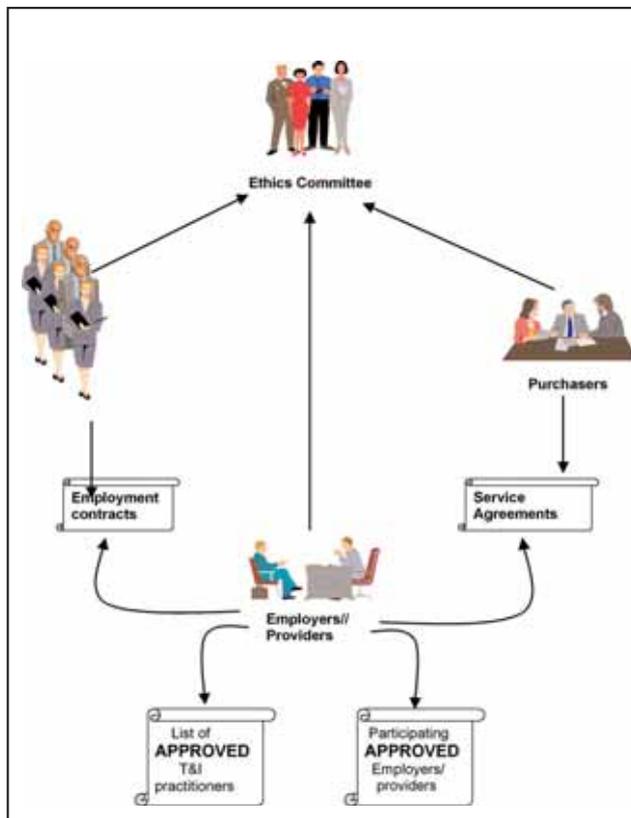




**Diagram 2**

Centrelink provides internally through its multilingual services unit.

Interpreting – and less directly translating – facilitates communication between two parties, conveying the

intended meaning of each in language the other understands. As well as sustained concentration and excellent short-term memory, it requires the detachment and objectivity to which journalists once aspired. Both translators and interpreters are responsible for accurate interpretation but neither is responsible for the content of the exchange between the other parties. Bilingual counselling and information- giving carries the same duty of care as the same processes conducted in English. In terms of language resources, the question of continuing debate is whether translating and interpreting services supplement bilingual services or vice versa.

The 1996 House of Representatives report on Access and Equity commended what was then the DSS model of counter service to its multicultural clients and recommended that

> The practice of supplementing interpreting and translating services by the employment of bilingual/bicultural staff be adopted across the levels of departments and agencies which are required to deliver services [3].

In the health and legal areas, however, the report noted, only accredited NAATI interpreters and translators should be used[4].

Earlier, while recommending extension of telephone and other interpreting and translating services, the 1978 Galbally Report expressed preference for bilingual services as "the better of the two arrangements"[5]. According to Galbally, it took twice as long to use an interpreter as to provide service directly in the language of the client. Bilingual staff avoided the cost of a "middleman"and were more effective, since direct communication reduced the cost of distortion. Most migrants, the report asserted, preferred not to use interpreters. On the other hand, recruiting bilingual staff was a long-term strategy and would "never in any case provide a complete solution to the problem of meeting the needs of the non-English-speaking migrant".

In effect, Galbally took a view directly opposite to some other studies, a point of continuing significance because Galbally principles continue to be predominant in the rationale of settlement policies and services. A further point of confusion arises from the effect of a language component in so called "ethno-specific" or "culturally appropriate" services. There is still greater confusion between those specific skills and the more general benefits ascribed to linguistic and cultural diversity. The House of Representatives Report, for example, regarded its recommendations on bilingual services as reinforcing "productive diversity" while the current Multicultural Agenda regards translating and interpreting as essential to service for a multicultural society. To the extent that languages mirror cultures, interpreting and translating contribute to the richness of multicultural Australia, but that is a secondary, not a primary function.

## Repositioning T&I within the language services inventory

When we think of translating and interpreting in Australia, are we thinking of a profession? A craft? An industry? Or a service? The dimensions change depending on perspective. All four categories coexist and we need to recognise how their elements interact if we want to take full advantage of the global forces that are shaping the course of the 21st century. Most of the issues I have touched on can be readily understood as by-products of immigration, the process of resettling several million people of diverse origin in Australia over the past fifty years. The issues arise from a concentration on a domestic market artificially created by governments seeking to accelerate the acceptance into Australian society of non-English speakers. While much has been achieved to merit Australia's international reputation for innovation and standard-setting, many of the problems have proved intractable. Take, for example, Recommendation 4 of the 1974 COPQ Report:

> That the Australian and State Governments give priority in employment to certificated interpreters and translators, and that by a date to be fixed in consultation with the National Council on Interpreting and Translating only certificated people will be employed[6].

Such exclusivity has proved impossible, either because of public service union pressure to protect the jobs of existing employees or because it is seen as a purist view running counter to the pragmatic need to communicate with clients requiring immediate service. A countervailing view has currency, demanding that standards be lowered so that each State or even each region within a State can have its own pool of recognised language "experts". TIS and other government services do give priority to accredited professionals but only where and when they are available. As far as I am aware, no employer pays

a loading to professionals in recognition of their status. [*Editorial note: AUSIT is aware of one or two cases of state government agencies paying higher rates to translators and interpreters accredited at the professional level.*] Governments already have rejected a NAATI proposal to limit the period that practitioners can remain at the para-professional level.

It should go without saying that standards should not be lowered to accommodate people who cannot meet those standards. It should – but it doesn't. Many people continue to argue that some assistance is better than none. They reject the position the COPQ working party put nearly 30 years ago:

> Interpreting and translating needs fall into two main categories: those which are experienced by the non-English-speaker trying to communicate his problems to, for example, his employer or his doctor, and those of the English-speaking Australian to believe that he has little or no need for an interpreter, and that he 'understands' when in fact he does not.

Another equally dangerous situation occurs when an untrained person, such as a child or a member of a hospital's domestic staff with some knowledge of both English and the foreign language concerned, is used as an interpreter[7]. Dangerous? Yes, if the situation is life-threatening. But otherwise? Not necessarily.

## Reappraising the potential markets: global and domestic

At the beginning of the 21st century the future of translating and interpreting for Australian practitioners lies at least as much in global markets as in the dynamics of the domestic market[8]. In my view there is an urgent need to reposition translating and interpreting within the inventory of language services that are required for communication in a multicultural society. That repositioning should take account of the needs of indigenous residents and of non-English speakers who have aged in Australia as well as the demand arising from continuing refugee, humanitarian and migration intakes.

It needs to take account of the fact that Australia is and over 200 years has been an English-speaking society. That remains true regardless of the linguistic diversity of the indigenous peoples who were scattered across the continent long before the encroachment of English-speaking Europeans. English is the language for all legal and official purposes; it is the language for business

purposes; it is the language of everyday use. English is the language of Australia and Australians and that remains true regardless of how many other languages are spoken in the home or in any other context. I emphasise that so strongly because the scope for a domestic market in translating and interpreting is limited to that context.

When we have that clearer view of why we value competence in languages other than English, we need to use that understanding in a comprehensive reappraisal of the market for Australian translating and interpreting services. Sandra Kipp, Michael Clyne and Anne Pauwels made a good start in their neglected 1995 study for the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research. We need to revisit issues that have bedevilled us for two decades, notably the chronic, perhaps inevitable, mismatch between supply and demand, as new language groups emerge ahead of a capacity to accredit and/or train and accredit competent professionals; as with so many other fundamentals of immigration, the phenomenon was starkly visible during the period of safe haven given to Albanian-speaking Kosovars a couple of years ago.

Some of the fundamentals continue to elude us.

**Table 5** -Top ten languages Spoken in Australia/by recent arrivals (since 1995)/by NAATI accreditations

As a further contrast, the top ten languages for fee-free use are in order: Vietnamese, Arabic, Mandarin, Serbian, Cantonese, Spanish, Bosnian, Croatian, Persian and Turkish.

## Knowing our real capacity

Nearly 30 years after TIS was launched as the Emergency Telephone Interpreter Service in 1973, slightly less time since COPQ recommended the set of tasks that led to the creation of NAATI in 1977, more than a decade since the acceptance of Joe Lo Bianco's seminal report on a National Languages Policy, we cannot accurately describe all the building blocks. Take the most obvious: how many translators and interpreters do we have?

**Table 6** shows NAATI accreditations since 1977 and **Table 7** accreditations by language.

As Table 6 shows, NAATI has made 25,037 accreditations since 1977. These are not helpful figures for calculating the size of the practitioner pool available today. I understand that on average an accredited person holds 1.6 accreditations so that the aggregate

**Table 5 -Top ten languages**

| Spoken in Australia | | By recent arrivals (since 1995) | | By NAATI accreditations | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| English | 14m | English | 118, 806 | N/A | |
| Italian | 53000 | Chinese (all forms) | 49,156 | Chinese (all forms) | 4,745 |
| Greek | 269000 | Arabic (incl. Lebanese) | 12,616 | Spanish | 2,080 |
| Cantonese | 22000 | Indonesian | 8,223 | German | 1,657 |
| Arabic | 177000 | Vietnamese | 7,101 | Italian | 1,592 |
| Vietnamese | 14600 | Serbian | 6,518 | Arabic | 1,209 |
| German | 98000 | Tagalog | 5,990 | Greek | 996 |
| Mandarin | 92000 | Bosnian | 5,308 | Serbian | 821 |
| Spanish | 91000 | Russian | 4,447 | Russian | 658 |
| | | Persian/Farsi/Dari | 4,309 | Indonesian | 464 |
| | | | | Bosnian | 186 |

Sources: DIMA Settlement Database/NAATI

suggests a pool of 15,648 practitioners. But the figures are incremental and do not make allowance for deaths or retirements or other withdrawals from practice. NAATI figures will diminish in value as a basis for estimating the actual size of the T&I pool because an increasing proportion of NAATI accreditations are of overseas applicants wishing to maximise the points available to them for migration purposes.

A better idea of numbers of practitioners may be had from those registered for work with TIS. For years the TIS pool was said to number around 5,000 but many of those were never assigned or only rarely assigned work. The pool has been culled in recent years to the present figure of 1915 of whom 1,090 are registered for interpreting work, 667 for translating and 100 for both.

**Table 6:** NAATI accreditations from 1977 to 30 June 2001

| Category | Number |
|---|---|
| Paraprofessional Translator | 4 219 |
| Paraprofessional Interpreter | 8 883 |
| | |
| Translator into English | 4 108 |
| Translator into LOTE | 4 955 |
| Interpreter | 2 501 |
| | |
| Advanced Translator into English | 116 |
| Advanced Translator into LOTE | 123 |
| Conference Interpreter | 76 |
| | |
| Advanced Translator into English (Senior) | 2 |
| Advanced Translator into LOTE (Senior) | 5 |
| Conference Interpreter (Senior) | 49 |
| | |
| **Total** | 25 037 |

**Table 7** - NAATI accreditation by language

| Language | Paraprofessional | | Professional (all levels) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Interpreter | Translator | Interpreter | Translator - into English | Translator - into LOTE |
| Chinese | | | | 217 | 439 |
| Mandarin | 904 | 762 | 276 | 410 | 663 |
| Cantonese | 604 | 195 | 144 | 131 | |
| Spanish | 731 | 351 | 220 | 427 | 351 |
| German | 271 | 367 | 94 | 478 | 447 |
| Italian | 495 | 257 | 242 | 302 | 296 |
| Arabic | 445 | 192 | 164 | 183 | 225 |
| Greek | 342 | 181 | 162 | 142 | 169 |
| Serbian | 310 | 103 | 122 | 134 | 152 |
| Russian | 142 | 82 | 81 | 126 | 227 |
| Indonesian | 122 | 70 | 30 | 138 | 104 |
| Bosnian | 115 | 27 | 8 | 14 | 22 |

Of professional translators only five have been accredited at advanced level [Editorial note: this should be Advanced (Senior) level, where the main requirement at present is international conference translating experience] (all in Russian) while the 17 translators accredited at Advanced level in Arabic and the 13 In Mandarin contrast with the 31 in Spanish, 20 in Italian and 62 in German.

It would be interesting to compare the pattern of NAATI accreditations with the profile of TIS contractors – for example how many are on TIS books for each language in demand and how many (if any) are paid more than $20,000 annually or less than $5,000 annually. Unfortunately such data is not readily available. In some languages potential suppliers exceed actual demand while in others the reverse applies. In terms of professional competence, perhaps the size of Australia's T&I pool is best indicated by AUSIT membership.

**Table 8** shows services advertised on the Internet Yellow Pages. As can be seen, translating services in aggregate are double the number of interpreting services – an imbalance reflected in each State/Territory, even allowing for a marked distortion in Victoria. I am not sure what that tells us. Perhaps that translators can work across borders; perhaps that more translators are available for part-time work. Perhaps we should give more thought to the differences between the two skills sets for which linguistic values may be comparable but where work practices and employment prospects differ widely. Or none of the above. We need more research on these fundamentals.

**The way forward**

The development of translating and interpreting services in Australia is almost entirely an achievement of governments. Governments have funded services, governments have funded training, governments have fostered the skills of bilingual individuals and paid them to apply those skills. Governments have subsidised the costs of setting standards of professional competence and professional practice. Much of this activity has occurred within portfolios associated with the immigration program and with the successful settlement of migrants. Some people seem to regret those linkages and agitate for closer association with education and training.

In my view, far less would have been achieved if the early development of the profession had had to compete for attention amid the waves of change that have affected tertiary education over the past few decades. Sufficient perhaps to note that the Commonwealth continues to fund NAATI but withdrew core funding from the National Language Institute of Australia that was located within the Employment and Education portfolio.

**Table 8 [**Services advertised on Internet Yellow Pages]

| State/Territory | Interpreters | Translators |
|---|---|---|
| ACT | 11 | 20 |
| NSW | 118 | 168 |
| NT | 6 | 8 |
| QLD | 35 | 100 |
| SA | 19 | 29 |
| TAS | 9 | 16 |
| VIC | 84 | 200+ |
| WA | 25 | 54 |
| | | |
| **All** | **307** | **595+** |
| **Extracted from Internet Yellow Pages 18/10/01** | | |

For all that, there is no reason for the past to dictate the future. Business, after all, is not the core business of government, although modern governments enjoy taking dividends from the investments past generations have made in public utilities. Whatever they say about outputs and outcomes, elected governments tend to be inspired more by the satisfaction of interest groups than by the bottom line of balance sheets. Administrators, sensitive to the ebb and flow of political priorities, are risk-averse when profit making entails risk.

So Australia's translating and interpreting services are unlikely to flourish if their future is left to government alone. Since NAATI, like other service providers, is an instrument of government, there is a role that AUSIT may be best placed to carry out --the catalyst that brings together all stakeholders, private and public. You can engage government by proving the breadth of its interests, pointing for example to the millions spent annually in the promotion of trade or to the lucrative success of private and public providers in selling the Australian version of English-As-A-Second Language to students throughout. the Asian-Pacific region. Of course every global opportunity needs to resonate with a domestic interest. Yet, if a reappraisal of the translating and interpreting market is to deliver any practical result, it must be more comprehensive than any study previously undertaken.

Just remember the caution I expressed earlier: change always takes much longer than an optimist hopes or a pessimist expects. Jill Blewett knew that – and was never discouraged in her advocacy of her profession. I know all of you here are dedicated to following her example.

Notes:

1 - The Review of Post-Arrival Programs and Services to Migrants, AGPS Canberra 1978, better known as the Galbally Report, recommended that the Commonwealth contribute $1.5m to a cost-sharing program that would enable States to provide interpreting and translating services in areas for which they had direct responsibility (specified as "health, law, education and general demands placed on State departments").

2 - Review of the Commonwealth Translating and Interpreting Service, prepared for the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs by the TIS Review Unit, 28 May 1997, paras 1.29 and 6.5.1

3 - House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, A Fair Go For All, Report on Migrant Access and Equity, AGPS Canberra, January 1996, p.88

4 - Ibid, p.98

5 - Galbally Report, p.50

6- The Language Barrier, A Report to the Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications by its Working Party on Interpreting, August 1974 , AGPS Canberra 1977, p.4

7 - The Language Barrier, p.8

8 - As early as 1984 the Report on A National Language Policy by the Senate Education and Arts Committee was pointing out: "The demand for particular languages in the international sphere depends largely on trading patterns and diplomatic requirements. In community languages the demand for services depends on such factors as the number of people in a particular ethnic community, the general level of literacy in the community and whether or not the community is well-established in Australia."

9 - KIPP Sandra et al, Immigration and Australia's Language Resources, AGPS Canberra, 1995.