

The translating and interpreting industry — a pillar of multiculturalism.

On November 12th, 2011 at University House ANU in Canberra following the National Annual General Meeting, newly elected President Annamaria Arnall welcomed Senator Kate Lundy, Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, and invited her to present the 19th Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture for 2011. AUSIT invites a distinguished speaker to present the lecture each year, to honour the memory of Jill Blewett, who played an important role in the early development of the translating and interpreting profession in Australia.

Senator Lundy (who is also Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, and Senator for the ACT) confined her presentation to interpreting and translation in the context of multiculturalism, acknowledging interpreters and translators as great enablers and champions whose work in government language services provides guidance and gives a voice to migrants settling into the community. She affirmed the government's support for translating and interpreting in Australia, and acknowledged the work of interpreters in assisting new arrivals through the government's free services, such as TIS National (possibly the only service of its kind in the world) and the Doctors Helpline and service to pharmacies. She also recognised the invaluable work of interpreters in bushfire and flood relief. In addition, following a successful pilot program, there will be an expansion of free interpreting services for real estate agents and their clients.

In highlighting the low rates of pay in a field where demand outstrips supply — in community-based interpreting, practitioners are paid less than cleaners — Senator Lundy recommended better remuneration for interpreters, in light of the skills they bring to language services. She thanked practitioners for their role in building a bridge between

Australian society and arriving communities, citing Census data on migration and the multicultural make-up of Australia today.

Senator Lundy congratulated AUSIT on its Excellence Awards, and expressed interest in learning more about the testing of practitioners. She indicated one point of contention between NAATI and AUSIT. This concerns qualifications obtained through NAATI accreditation versus those obtained through relevant tertiary study. She is looking forward to the results of the review commissioned by NAATI, *Improvements to NAATI Testing Project*, from a consortium led by AUSIT member Professor Sandra Hale from the University of New South Wales. Through a four-stage process the review will encompass 'standards, levels of accreditation, emerging technologies and assessment and training models.'¹ Completion is expected in October 2012.

New developments in telephone interpreting technology and enhanced video interpreting, facilitated by the National Broadcasting Network, may be of benefit to interpreters.

Senator Lundy drew attention to two government reports of interest to the profession, and provided multiple copies of both. The first, *The People of Australia - Australia's Multicultural Policy* (2011) affirms the need for government services and programs to respond to the needs of our culturally diverse communities and for the government to provide equitable services to all Australians. The *Access and Equity in Government Services Report 2008-10* features examples of "how government agencies are responding to the needs of Australia's multicultural society". It includes inter alia a 2009 'own-motion' report (p.30) by the Ombudsman on the use of interpreters by 4 government

¹ NAATI NEWS July-September, 2011 p.2 Vol. 24 Issue 3.

agencies². The provision of services “was not always done in an accessible, responsive or fair manner” (p. 30) and the need was identified to develop strategies to provide timely, high-quality interpreter services.

Senator Lundy took questions and comments from the floor. These included concerns that:

- The separate responsibilities for indigenous, sign and migrant/refugee language services (at present coming under different ministries) could be located within one portfolio, removing an inappropriate separation.

Senator Lundy responded by saying that these issues could be considered during the NAATI review.

Other issues which were mentioned include the following:

- that there are large gaps in the provision of services notably in the small and emerging languages, meaning that not all Australian citizens have access to adequate language services
-
- The government has a legal obligation to ensure access to services.
- Interpreters and translators are undervalued and underpaid.
- Unlike most professions, the income of interpreters is going down across the sector and this means fewer qualified professionals can afford to continue practising.

Senator Lundy acknowledged these issues as significant, observing that low rates of pay are a barrier and that the government should

² Australian Federal Police, DEEWR, Centrelink and DIAC.

encourage upgrading of skills, but was unable to offer a firm commitment to change the situation in the short term. She referred to a recent government initiative to raise pay in the community sector, inferring that this would flow on to our profession.

In conclusion, Senator Lundy affirmed the Federal Government's support for our profession and expressed her thanks to practitioners for the role they play in the delivery of programs which improve the quality of life for all Australians. She has found it inspiring to learn more about the practice of interpreting and translation, and about AUSIT's robust Code of Ethics. She assured us that the government is grateful for the work being done, and keen to work with us in the future. A copy of her address will be available in the publications section of the AUSIT website.

The session concluded with a vote of thanks to Senator Lundy. She then joined AUSIT and guests for lunch. Among the guests were Dr Neal Blewett, representatives from academic institutions and relevant government departments including NAATI CEO John Beever, the Chair and Directors of the NAATI Board and Trevor Neroy, the new Director of TIS National.