



**AUSIT** 

**2021 National Conference  
In Perth And Online**

**JILL BLEWETT MEMORIAL LECTURE: AUSIT NATIONAL  
CONFERENCE, PERTH 2021**

**Presented by  
The Honourable Dr Tony Buti MLA,  
Minister for Education; Aboriginal Affairs; Citizenship and  
Multicultural Interests**

I acknowledge the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation, the traditional owners of the land we're meeting on today and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

And I am sorry I missed the Welcome to Country, performed by the Noongar Mooditch Minang Jinna dance group, all of whom I understand were interpreters.

And I believe they were joined by some who travelled all the way from Broome.

We are privileged to live in a place that can trace its culture and languages back more than 60,000 years.

Compare this with the English language which has been developing for just over 1,400 years.

Language is an essential part of culture, and its preservation is crucial to maintaining connections to people, culture and land.

Language holds the stories, songs, dances, protocols, family histories and connections of a people.

The New South Wales Gamilaroi Elder, Aunty Rose Fernando, once said:

*Language is our soul.* Interpreters and translators are therefore not just a vital bridge to ensure access to services but are also helping to keep languages, and the soul of a people and their culture, alive.

As such, I recognise the efforts of the agencies here today to increase the number of trained and credentialled Aboriginal interpreters across the State.

It is therefore both an honour and, in this context fitting, to acknowledge Jill Blewett, one of the pioneers and champions of the interpreting and translating industry in Australia.

It is also a pleasure to see all the translating and interpreting practitioners present here today.

The translating and interpreting sector is inextricably linked with the government's responsibility for providing accessible and equitable services.

So today I would like to talk to you about the role of languages in a multicultural society from my perspective as a Government Minister—in particular, during a pandemic.

### **A culturally and linguistically diverse society**

Western Australia continues to be an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse society.

The 2016 Census indicated that more than 32 per cent of the population were born overseas and almost 54 per cent had one, or both, parents born overseas.

More than 240 languages are spoken—including Aboriginal languages and dialects.

Nearly 18 per cent of Western Australians speak a language other than English at home and in just five years—from 2011 to 2016—the number had increased by almost 35 per cent.

It will be interesting to see the results of this year's Census, which I imagine will indicate an even greater number and diversity.

Migration has shaped our contemporary society.

It has made Australia the successful nation—and Western Australia the thriving State—that it is today, and it continues to bring great benefits to all of us.

At the same time, it brings challenges in maximising these benefits, in ensuring equitable outcomes for all, and in maintaining community cohesion.

### **The Charter of Multiculturalism and Substantive Equality**

If you will bear with me, I would like to take us a little back in time.

In 2004 the State Government endorsed the WA Charter of Multiculturalism.

The Charter recognises Aboriginal peoples' unique position as Australia's First Peoples while articulating the Western Australian Government's commitment to multiculturalism.

It is founded on four principles: civic values, fairness, equality and participation.

It identifies key objectives for government to achieve an inclusive and harmonious society.

The Charter recognises that diversity is a feature of society, whether in terms of age, gender, disability, sexuality, socioeconomic or cultural and linguistic background.

It promotes the participation of each and every citizen within an inclusive society.

Being a citizen is not simply a legal status that confers rights and obligations.

It is about being able to participate equitably in the political, social and economic life of this society and enabling everyone to do so is vital.

The Charter introduced the notion of 'substantive equality' which, while not being a part of everyday parlance, is now widely accepted as a key objective for governments across Australia.

Put simply, substantive equality acknowledges that people need to be treated as the individuals they are, with all their individual attributes.

People need to be treated differently in order for everyone to participate fully.

And a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, rather than being an equaliser, can directly disadvantage some people.

It is a concept perhaps most easily explained in the context of disability, where adjustments to an environment or approach may need to be made for a person to access places, services, and opportunities.

And of course, in the context of language, interpreting and translations may be needed to ensure that everyone can understand critical information, can access services, and be treated fairly in the justice system.

For individuals to achieve their goals, contribute to their community and be active citizens, they must be able to access the same opportunities as everyone else.

This includes access to education and health services, and to employment opportunities.

Most of us take these for granted and may not think twice about being able to communicate our needs and having those needs met.

However, as you all know only too well, an inability to communicate in English is a significant barrier for many people in Australia.

A barrier that can result in people being excluded from the chance to fully participate.

If there was any doubt about the importance of language services, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how vital they are.

While Auslan interpreters and subtitles are now more common on the television, much work still needs to be done to make multilingual communication an integral feature of mainstream information and promotion.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic**

On 25th January 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was detected in Australia.

At the time, the Australian Government stated that it was confident that our 'world-class health systems' and 'isolation facilities' would manage this new virus.

Authorities here in Australia and around the world knew little about the virus and could hardly predict the impact it would have on all our lives.

What we have found, is that in Australia the virus has tracked along lines of disadvantage, that the impact has been more severely felt by those in lower socioeconomic groups.

We saw this in the recent outbreak of the Delta variant in Sydney, where though the first case was in Bondi in Sydney's more affluent east, it was Sydney's west and south-west that endured the most acute impact.

With some of the hardest hit local government areas such as Canterbury-Bankstown reportedly having up to 80 per cent of workers in essential jobs, it was easy to see how the virus spread so quickly and how people who could not work from home were impacted on many levels.

These areas of Sydney were also home to strong migrant populations.

Canterbury-Bankstown has over 44 per cent of residents born overseas and over 60 per cent of all residents speaking a language other than English at home.

These areas were then subjected to tighter lockdown restrictions and COVID-19 testing regimes—further impacting these residents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

For example, there were cases where people misunderstood health advice and didn't take family members to hospital in time—these were potentially avoidable deaths.

Understanding the uneven effect of COVID-19, highlights the critical need to ensure that people who are most vulnerable to its impact, are provided with the in-language resources to manage and respond to changing circumstances.

The failure to do so was most dramatically illustrated with the 'hard lockdown' of nine Melbourne public housing buildings in July 2020, in an attempt to quickly suppress a COVID-19 outbreak.

And though this was undertaken as a public health measure during a time of crisis and uncertainty, for those 3,000 people, many of whom were from migrant and refugee backgrounds, it was a curtailing of their freedoms.

And in any case, the detention was going to have health, social and economic impacts on residents.

But what intensified the impact, was the deficiencies in communication.

An investigation into the detention by the Victorian Ombudsman revealed that the information provided to residents was either "confused, incomprehensible, or simply lacking".

The Ombudsman found that a proper consideration of human rights would have allowed for time to communicate with residents.

Instead, some residents did not receive Detention Directions in plain English and other languages until after the directions were revoked.

And though government officials tasked with calling and advising residents had access to interpreters, due to resourcing and other challenges, nearly half of all households were not contacted.

This had serious impacts on those who required support and residents reported no longer feeling safe in Australia and that they felt like they were “treated like criminals”.

I do not mention this to criticise the Victorian response—in fact it was found that staff worked excessive hours to deliver support.

Rather, I raise it as a stark reminder of how critical it is for government to keep language services at the forefront of emergency responses.

### **Ongoing challenges of COVID-19**

Now more than a year since the pandemic was declared, a number of studies have taken place and there is greater understanding of how effective different strategies are in communicating health messages.

Earlier this year, work was undertaken by the University of New South Wales and the University of Technology Sydney to investigate the strategies needed to improve communication on the COVID-19 vaccination program with Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The research highlighted several ongoing challenges, including:

- Gaps in information and delays in providing information.
- Governments translated information with the best of intentions, but many people could not navigate government websites or simply could not, or did not, access information online.



- Understandably, information could not be translated into all languages.
- In many cases, people were accessing information from their country of origin, which did not necessarily have any relation to the environment in the country in which they lived and, which was sometimes inaccurate or misleading.
- Messages were not tailored to particular communities or age groups and
- Ethnic media and ethnic newspapers were not used effectively or used at all.

It must also be said that across Australia, especially where there have been outbreaks, it has been communities themselves who have led the charge in creating quick translations of health advice and restrictions.

This was particularly evident in the July 2020 outbreaks in Melbourne and in the July 2021 outbreaks in Sydney.

I applaud the civic-mindedness and hard work of volunteers in the community who addressed these important needs.

However, it also underlined the work that needs to be done by government with the interpreting and translating sector to improve time-sensitive and accurate communication with linguistically diverse communities.

## Trust

The theme of the 2021 Conference is: ‘Another *word*, Another world’.

This can be understood—or *interpreted*—in a number of ways.

A very old use of the concept ‘word’ is in its equivalence to ‘bond’.

As in, ‘my word is my bond’.

Something you may have heard *too* often from politicians.

This idiom heralds back at least to ancient Hebrew tradition, where the elder Moshe in the Book of Numbers tells: “When a man ... swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word”.

This evokes the trust between people, necessary for any social contract.

In a world engulfed by a pandemic, we have found that trust is central to humanity’s ability to respond to this global crisis.

As a Minister of Government, I of course speak of trust in government.

In Western Australia—and across the States and Territories—we have been fortunate to have built considerable trust amongst the community.

But in the context of COVID-19, this cannot be taken for granted.

We all know the challenges that have faced governments around the world in getting people to trust health advice and vaccines.

This has been heightened when information about the virus and the appropriate responses have continued to evolve.

So, we rely heavily on trust—when it comes to the appreciation of health advice, compliance with restrictions, and the adoption of vaccines.

Furthermore, in the case of a highly contagious disease, we all need to come together if we are to keep each other safe—and if we are to keep the vulnerable safe.

WA adopted the mantra of “we’re all in this together”.

But to have everyone on side, the message of togetherness needs to reach everyone.

And part of that is building trust in the message—building trust in the fact that the government is trying to reach everyone.

And though there are several strategies needed, interpreters and translators play an invaluable role in building that trust.

One part of this is relaying hygiene information, making sure health orders are understood, and clarifying information about vaccines.

But critically, your role in facilitating communication with people with low-English language proficiency, and those who are Deaf and hard of hearing, helps ensure that *everyone* knows and trusts that governments and services are about them and for them.

That governments are actively being inclusive.

You ensure that the message that “we’re all in this together”, is inclusive of *all* of us.

When it comes to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we know that a wide impasse of trust can exist.

That when communicating messages and hearing from communities, it is not simply about language, but culture and communicating within a context of history.

And there are further challenges when reaching regional and remote communities.

I cannot speak more highly of the work undertaken by Aboriginal Interpreting WA—and what I know is true for services across Australia—in reaching our First Nations peoples through this crisis.

For people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, trust has been acutely challenged during the pandemic.

Since the onset of COVID-19, we have seen a growing sense of divisiveness and even nationalism in the rhetoric of certain actors around the world.

Here in Australia, we experienced a rise in racial harassment and vilification—particularly targeting our Chinese and Asian communities.

This attack on our valued social cohesion, also worked to undermine trust between people in society.

For other communities, such as refugee communities in western and south-west Sydney, trust was again challenged by the heavy-handed use of police and Australian Defence Force personnel in enforcing restrictions.

Reminding some people of past traumatic experiences at the hands of their former governments from where they escaped to shelter in Australia.

However, even in south-west Sydney, we have seen trust reengaged and subsequent vaccination rates skyrocket.

With Bankstown being the first suburb in New South Wales to reach 90 per cent first dose vaccination on 11th September 2021.

This is in no small part due to the heavy adoption of language services by government and the media.

SBS even launched a live translation service of the daily New South Wales government COVID-19 press conference in languages other than English.

Again, this goes to emphasise the importance that interpreters and translators have and continue to play in shoring up the bonds and trust between people and government.

### **An important reminder**

Amongst the challenges, throughout this period, some very positive outcomes and learnings were achieved.

I would suggest that Auslan led the way.

Some of the most recognisable faces from the daily media sessions, provided by various Premiers over so many months, have been those of Auslan interpreters.

In Western Australia, Fiona Perry, Premier McGowan's Auslan interpreter, has become a rockstar in her own right—so much so that she has been chased for selfies.

A portrait of her with the Premier is currently hanging in the Western Australian Parliament, although—in the interests of full disclosure—my wife, Mandy, was the artist behind the work.

Why is Fiona so popular? Because she creates a communication pathway between groups.

In the first instance this is between the Deaf community and the government.

But her interpreting skills transcend the simple provision of cold hard facts and move into something deeper—an extra layer of empathy and emotion that can be interpreted by anyone.

Above all, she is an almost daily reminder of the barriers that confront some in our society, which are not always obvious and as such, are not always addressed.

I am thinking of other communication challenges such as an intellectual disability or a cognitive impairment, which of course are outside the scope of this sector but nonetheless are important considerations for government.

Earlier I spoke about the importance of equity and substantive equality and the need to integrate these concepts into the services we provide as government.

Of course, it's not always easy to understand the importance of equity, especially if you yourself may not require differences in consideration or treatment.

It's something that must be brought to top-of-mind for many of us.

When it comes to language services, in a country like Australia where most people only speak one language, it is not always obvious where equity fits in.

That's one thing that the pandemic has done that hopefully drives us to change the way we understand the place of equity for people who have different linguistic needs and who may be Deaf or hard of hearing.

And this is what interpreters like Fiona have done, they have raised the profile of people who require support reminding us about the importance of equity when it comes to language and communication.

## **Addressing the challenges of multilingual communication**

For many in the public sector here in WA, as I am sure was the case in other States and Territories, the need to reach culturally and linguistically diverse communities was one of the great COVID-19 challenges.

This meant a steep learning curve in terms of multilingual communication.

We quickly learnt that without first engaging with our communities, our strategies would not be effective.

In Western Australia, the Office of Multicultural Interests, as the State Government's agency most connected to our culturally and linguistically diverse communities, was immediately mobilised.

The staff provided advice on the use of language services whilst directly communicating critical information about the pandemic to community and faith leaders.

An important role of the Office of Multicultural Interests is to build and maintain trust between culturally and linguistically diverse communities and government.

Their work focussed on hard-to-reach communities and those with low-English language proficiency.

Along with WA Police Force Community Engagement Team, the Office of Multicultural Interests maintained close and ongoing communication with communities—letting them know the Government was listening to their concerns and ideas and using those insights to inform the work of other agencies responding to the pandemic.

The Premier, Minister for Health, Chief Health Officer and I, met with members of my Ministerial Multicultural Advisory Council specifically to

discuss ways to promote COVID-19 vaccination within our culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The Roll up for WA campaign has seen 30 second translated radio ads in languages including Mandarin, Arabic, Cantonese and Hindi.

Translated versions of TV commercials have been used in cinemas that show Chinese and Indian movies.

The animated 'How to book your COVID-19 vaccine' video is available in multiple languages.

As well as this, video and social media clips have been developed to promote COVID-safe behaviours.

Some of you attending this conference may well have been involved in these initiatives and have carried out some of these translations.

And the importance of your role cannot be underestimated. As the poet Suzy Kassem has said:

*Never trust the translation or interpretation of something without first trusting its interpreter.*

And the Spanish politician, Miguel Sanz, has commented that:

*If the translator does his job as he should, he is a benefactor of humanity; otherwise he is a veritable public enemy.*

This points to both trust in the translator as well as the accuracy of the translation.

And of course, translating—and interpreting—new and alien concepts is complex.



There are no two words with exactly the same meaning, and it is a true skill—and even an art—to convey the meaning with accuracy and all the history that has come with the original.

The need to reach communities to deliver vital health messages during the pandemic was also creatively addressed by Aboriginal Interpreting WA.

You may have seen this highlighted in an AUSIT 'Intouch' newsletter.

Given the CEO, Dee Lightfoot, is here today I hope I am not stealing her thunder.

I understand that, at the first hint of COVID-19, the organisation transitioned staff and interpreters offsite to ensure their safety and made sure they had the equipment and support needed to work remotely through telephone or videoconferencing.

As you would appreciate, access to health care is limited in some remote communities, making residents particularly vulnerable to the virus because of pre-existing medical conditions.

The switch to providing interpreting services remotely greatly reduced the risks all round.

Although great efforts were made to translate public information into Aboriginal languages, and were recorded, printed or prepared for use online and via radio, there were still challenges.

An obvious one is the time taken for government agencies to decide on responses and messaging, and then to get translations completed.

This was exacerbated by the rapidly changing circumstances in which we all found ourselves.

In a relatively short time, audio translations were developed—sometimes accompanied by written Plain English and sometimes by animation.

This, like some of the approaches used for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, brought together technology and the arts and made crucial information available in an easily accessible digital format.

Digital information, of course, is not the panacea in terms of access to information—or services.

Not everyone has access to a computer or owns a smart phone.

Digital literacy varies. Some people use smart phones and computers regularly while others, such as refugees and older migrants, may have little experience using them and may not yet have acquired the skills to do so.

### **Inclusive opportunities**

Nonetheless, the arts, media and technology clearly offer opportunities to bridge communication gaps in creative ways.

I am thinking of the Bruce Lee movie ‘Fist of Fury’ that has just been dubbed into Noongar, an Aboriginal language from the southwest of Western Australia.

I believe the project was inspired by Navajo translations of ‘Star Wars: A New Hope’ and ‘Finding Nemo’ in the United States.

For Clint Eastwood fans, I believe the latest release is the western, ‘A Fistful of Dollars’.

It is hoped that this Western Australian initiative will spark interest in what is an endangered language.

The director, Kylie Bracknell, has emphasised the importance of language to a person's identity.

This sentiment was also expressed by Craig Ritchie, CEO of the Australian Institute for Torres Strait Islander Studies, and I quote:

*“Language is more than about communication, it's an expression of who we are and an expression of identity”.*

The importance of a sense of belonging, is a core element in the Government of Western Australia's vision for this State.

Our vision is for:

*“an inclusive and harmonious society where everyone has a strong sense of belonging, can participate and contribute fully in all aspects of life and can achieve their goals”.*

Our vision is articulated in the Western Australian Policy Framework, which was launched last year.

The framework builds on the principles embedded in the WA Charter of Multiculturalism.

It sets out practical strategies to support and encourage public sector agencies to be responsive to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

This includes implementing the State's language services policy, a version of which has been in place since 1992.

Provision of language services is critical to achieving this vision and it cannot be achieved without the interpreting and translating sector.

You, as professional interpreters and translators, provide the services that too many of us take for granted.

As is so often the case, such realisations come as a result of a crisis.

The world has seen many changes over the past few decades.

The reduced cost of international travel and the advent of online communication channels heralded the arrival of a global society.

But when COVID-19 hit, the need to adapt to a world where traditional face-to-face interactions became impossible or even threatening.

This led to advancements in video technology and in the skills and behaviours of everyone.

In the interpreting and translating sector, I can see that these have led to new ways to deliver services and overcome barriers.

Barriers which may have included a reluctance to invest or engage with a technology that has become a lifeline for many.

People have spoken of the 'silver linings' that have been discovered through their own personal journey through the pandemic.

Perhaps this is one of them.

For the interpreting and translating sector, it will perhaps provide the ability, to reach more people—across States and Territories and particularly into remote locations.

At the same time, these technological innovations have brought with them the need for us to learn new and different ways of doing things, and I have no doubt this will be ongoing.

## **Conclusion**

Which leads to the important role played by professional associations—like AUSIT—and education and training organisations—to ensure the quality standards of interpreting and translating are met.

And as I have mentioned, the role of services like Aboriginal Interpreting WA in ensuring the cultural and historical contexts of communication are incorporated in the use of new mediums.

Society is dynamic.

We cannot predict the future, but we have shown that we can adapt and that we can respond with agility and creativity.

I commend all of you for your efforts and contribution not just during the pandemic, but for the part you intrinsically play when carrying out every assignment.

And I thank you especially for the role you play in keeping people together and building and maintaining trust.

COVID-19 has been a watershed moment for many things in our society.

Amongst these, it has highlighted the vulnerability of those in aged and disability care, the value of migration, and the importance of front-line workers of all skills.

Critically, it has been a reminder of the importance of human connection, of trust, and of thinking and working collaboratively as a society.

All these things are dependent on accessible communication and a vibrant interpreting and translating sector.

It has been said that ‘words travel worlds. Translators do the driving’.

For us here, this watershed moment must therefore also mean a renewed commitment to ensuring those language services are valued and truly integrated.

Thank you.

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Presented by

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Interests

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