

**Submission
No 10**

INQUIRY INTO AUSLAN INTERPRETATION FOR BROADCASTING

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To whom it may concern,

My name is Dr Jessica Kirkness. I am an academic and writer working in the fields of Deaf and Disability Studies. More significantly, I grew up with two profoundly Deaf grandparents, who radically shaped my life and my understanding of the importance of access and inclusion. I have written about issues facing the Deaf community in my doctoral thesis, as well as in publications like *The Conversation* and *Meanjin*, as well as appearing on ABC radio Sydney, Hobart, and Canberra. My memoir about my grandparents' lives and my relationship with them will be published by Allen and Unwin in 2023.

I am writing this submission in consultation with Shirley Liu, World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section President and passionate advocate and member of the Sydney Deaf Community. Shirley's first language is Auslan (Australian Sign Language), and she has undertaken significant advocacy work in the last decade, most importantly in the International Law Association's investigation into the Deaf Community's Access to Emergency Broadcasting.

When communicating with my grandparents, I used a mixture of spoken English and Auslan. My grandmother was an adept lip reader, which meant that she could converse in English with ease. But my grandfather struggled to read anyone's lips, and Auslan was always his preferred mode of communication – as is the case for many Deaf Australians whose first language is sign.

Communication breakdowns were a staple of my grandparents' experiences in the hearing world. Away from their Deaf peers with whom they shared a language and a cultural background, they faced several barriers. Most critical among these was access to information. Deaf people have been routinely excluded from public discourse and debate for much of our nation's history. I urge you to consider this when weighing the value of interpreters in the legislative council.

In recent years, incredible strides have been made in providing access to emergency broadcasts in Auslan. As a result of advocacy from plucky members of the Deaf community, we have seen a rise in the presence of Auslan interpreting throughout the 2019 bushfires and the pandemic. This is a wonderful step forward and enables access to critical safety information for d/Deaf members of society. But these recent changes, however welcome, are no cause for complacency or inertia.

Access to current affairs and news programming is currently limited, not to mention entertainment where people must rely on captions alone. There are no programs which currently provide interpreted content. Captioning is far from a solution, especially live captions which are often riddled with errors. My grandfather would frequently bemoan the inaccuracy and time delays that come with captioning. In 2021 there was a viral captioning mishap which took place in Canberra during a covid broadcast. 'Ken Behrens' was written in place of 'Canberrans', which titillated many ACT residents but also highlighted the potential risks of these inaccuracies for d/Deaf and disabled people who rely upon such services for clear messaging.

Cinemas are yet to provide much beyond 'captiview' - colloquially referred to as 'crap-ti-view', given the services' propensity to malfunction and divide the viewer between the handheld device and the screen. While these issues might be outside the scope of the legislative council's power, a decision to include Auslan in its broadcasts would set an important precedent that could lead to broader change in the nation. Change should begin and be led by government.

It is important to remember the necessity of Auslan for the Deaf community. It is not a mere representation of English on the hands but is a complete and complex language in its own right. Lip-reading words spoken in English is also insufficient, especially given that some studies estimate that accuracy for lipreading sentences rarely exceeds 10-30% accuracy (Ronnberg, 1995; Ronnberg, Samuelsson & Lyxell, 1998). Lip-reading is highly variable even in Deaf populations (Bernstein et al, 2000; Kyle et al., 2013).

Members may feel this matter is one that affects a minority of Australians, and indeed, the Deaf community is a small one. However, in all facets of public life, it is critical to have Auslan represented on screen, on stage, and in places of cultural significance like the NSW legislative council. The provision of Auslan as a language other than English is key to engaging the Deaf Community in political, social, cultural, and legal affairs that may affect them. As evidenced in emergency broadcasts, providing such services keeps people safe, informed, and aware. Having access to information about political events, news, and decision making is critical to any modern society. Deaf people should be afforded the same access to politics as their hearing citizens. The symbolic gravity of including Auslan in your proceedings would also do a great deal to encourage widespread inclusion.

We believe that this is an important leadership decision, one that the council should consider with due seriousness. The recent changes to emergency broadcasts serve as a pertinent example of what is possible when accommodating people from all walks of life. Including Auslan in proceedings would be a worthy commitment to the people this council should serve, and is in the interests of all people concerned with equality and diversity.

Sincerely,

Dr Jessica Kirkness