Aboriginal Education (Supplementary Assistance) Bill 1989

Date Introduced: 26 October 1989
House: House of Representatives
Portfolio: Employment, Education and Training

Digest of Bill

Purpose
To provide additional funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in the years 1990 to 1992 under the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.

Background
Assistance to Aboriginal (to be read as including Torres Strait Islanders) education is provided under a number of schemes at Commonwealth, State and local levels. For example, the Commonwealth funds 16 separate programs related to Aboriginal education, ranging from basic literacy and numeracy courses to the Abstudy program which provides financial assistance to certain Aboriginal children. In 1989–90, Abstudy is estimated to cost $95.8 million and provide assistance to 52,849 students.

There have been a number of recent reports dealing with Aboriginal education. The House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education reported in 1985 and made a number of findings and recommendations. Deficiencies in the system were apparent through the poor results being achieved, particularly in retention rates. The report found that absenteeism from secondary schools was very high, as much as 70% in some schools, and was not confined to Aboriginal-only schools. Secondary retention rates were also poor, although improving. The retention rate for year 12 increased from 7.5% in 1979, to 9.9% in 1982 and to 13.1% in 1984.¹ A recent estimate put the rate at 22% in 1988.² (The general year 12 retention rate in 1988 was about 57%.³) The same trends have been seen in post-secondary education.

Not surprisingly, the report found that Aborigines lacked equality in education opportunities and outcomes. While noting the difficulties due to the Commonwealth having responsibility for Aborigines and the States being responsible for education, and the different views of States and the Commonwealth on Aboriginal education, the report found that a major problem was the lack of coordination in Aboriginal education. The recommended approach was that the Commonwealth rationalise its agencies before assuming a greater
responsibility for the coordination and funding of Aboriginal education. The Report also concluded that for steps to improve the situation to be successful, there would need to be substantial input from the Aboriginal people. A system of national, State and local education consulative committees was also envisaged.

The area was subsequently examined by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Education, which was requested to inquire in November 1987. Its report, delivered in August 1989, noted the improved routes for coordination available through the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP), but also considered that there had been 'no comprehensive governmental response to all of the Select Committee's [1985] recommendations. Specific recommendations have been taken into account as part of the development of the AEDP and some other recommendations have been implemented as indicated in government statements on Aboriginal education since the report was tabled.' The Committee considered that the biggest difficulty remained the failure to yet implement a coordinated and cooperative response to Aboriginal education needs, though the difficulties with shared responsibility and political differences were again seen as a major problem in achieving this result. However, the Committee noted the proposed Aboriginal Education Policy and recommended that this policy should be based on the report of the Task Force established to report on this matter (see below) and the recommendations of the 1985 Report by the Select Committee.

In April 1988, the Ministers for Employment, Education and Training and Aboriginal Affairs established an Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force to advise on all aspects of Aboriginal education. The Task Force reported in July 1988 and its report provides a number of statistics on retention etc. based on the 1986 Census. Having again concluded that Aborigines were largely disadvantaged in education opportunities, the Task Force outlined a number of policy objectives, including that there be equity in the provision of education to Aborigines by 2000 and that equity with the rest of Australia be achieved in retention rates. The Task Force report, which was seen as stage one of the process, made a number of specific recommendations, many based on the need to improve coordination, and concluded: 'The Task Force recommends that a Commonwealth Aboriginal Education Policy document be finalised in stage two of the policy process, based upon this report.'

In October 1988, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training announced that a national policy would be developed in conjunction with the States and Territories. The policy was developed over 1989 and was tabled when this Bill was presented. The long term goals of the policy are outlined in that document, and center on greater Aboriginal involvement in decision making and equality of access, participation and outcome. The document also lists matters of a greater priority, such as the development of consultative machinery and improved access to, and participation in, pre-schooling and compulsory age schooling. A total of $266 million will be spent on the program over the three years 1990-1992. This Bill will appropriate $236.3 million of that amount.

Main Provisions

'Aboriginal' is defined to include Torres Strait Islanders (clause 3).

Clauses 4 to 7 deals with the objects of the Bill, which reflect the policy
outlined above, and provides for increased involvement in decision making, equal access, equity in participation and equity in outcomes.

The Minister may enter into agreements providing for the payment of money to people or bodies for the purpose of furthering the objects of the Bill (clause 8). Such agreements may be made with States, the Northern Territory or the A.C.T.; post-secondary education institutions; a person or body connected with an education system or institution; or with people qualified to carry out research into education (clause 9).

Clause 10 deals with conditions for agreements. Where a payment relates to an education program, monitoring and evaluation, or reporting conditions must be specified. Other payments may be subject to reporting requirements.

Clause 11 provides that $44,477 million appropriated under other Acts in 1989–90 will be available under this Bill. Clause 12 will appropriate the additional funds for 1990, and the funds for 1991 and 1992. In 1990, $32,032 million will be appropriated under clause 12, for 1991 this will be $79,364 million (plus this amount multiplied by the implicit price deflator for 1990), while in 1992 the amount will be $80,385 million plus this amount multiplied by both the 1990 and 1991 deflator figures.

The Minister is to report to Parliament on the operation of this Bill as soon as practicable after 1 July 1992 (clause 14).

References
1. House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, Report on Aboriginal Education, September 1985, p. 120.
3. 1989–90 Budget Paper No. 1, p. 3.76.

For further information, if required, contact the Education and Welfare Group.

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Bills Digest Service
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This Digest does not have any official legal status. Other sources should be consulted to determine the subsequent official status of the Bill.

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