Chris Burns – Education Minister: What we have done is move to clarify a policy that was misinterpreted by some deliberately and a lot of mischief around it and our focus is still on kids being literate and numerate in English and we’ve moved to a multi-lingual framework and there was extensive consultation as Matthew said last year it went out to public consultation I think it was August last year and there was a review by the Menzies school so there’s a fair bit of evidence base in here as well. And we’ve moved to clarify this particular policy and move on.

Matthew Cranitch – Australian Education Union: Yes it is a back flip there’s no doubt about it and it’s a back flip caused because ultimately what was happening in many of the bilingual communities was that they were just simply shunning and ignoring the government’s policy. They were just simply saying that bi-lingual education is the way to go and we are just simply not going to follow this first four hours of English rubbish we’re going simply going to continue to teach in our own language and try to gain proficiency for students in English and their own language.

Marion Scrymgour – Former Labor Education Minister: I think that there has been so much spin and non truths that have been said and people have used this and pushed this to further and I suppose justify the inaction that has been allowed to occur for a long time in these remote aboriginal communities.

Kate O’Toole – Broadcaster: What’s spin what are you saying has been untrue?< /p>

MS: I have come out very clearly saying what I got wrong and what I got wrong was saying that kids will only be speaking English in the first four hours of school and that was wrong to say that because the reality in most remote aboriginal communities the aboriginal language whatever is the first language would be used as a vehicle for instruction for English that was always what the transforming indigenous education policy was all about. I didn’t help things by spinning as well and pandering to a number people because we were I suppose having to justify the bad numbers and bad outcomes that we
were getting in our schools so saying that kids wouldn't be able to use their language but just that it would just be English, English, English only was a huge mistake of mine and I've admitted that and I've moved on. What hasn't moved on is the real debate in relation to the skills and the expertise that we need in those schools standing in front of those kids so that our children get the best standard of education that they need to take them not only now but into the future. Matthew Cranitch, Trish Crossin and many others who have said this is a back flip they have abrogated their responsibility to the very people that they represent and that is your mums and dads out in those communities who want better for their kids.

KO: But it is true isn't it? It is a back flip you admitted that you made a mistake.

MS: Not at all, not at all Kate what Chris Burns said is absolutely correct transforming indigenous education was a very, very broad framework and it needed the department to put the substance and the clarification on a number of areas. One of those areas was the teaching of standard Australian English now that is the area that all of the areas that I should have concentrated on was the professional development and the work that need to be done with not just our non-aboriginal teaching staff but our aboriginal teaching staff we have aboriginal teachers that have not been supported or developed over many years but we were expecting them to stand in front of classrooms and in front of children and to teach when they didn't have the basic training in teaching.

KO: Well the question then becomes if you got education policy so very wrong not only in the way it was framed in the discussion of it but in the delivery of the training and support for teachers how could people trust Labor with education policy now?

MS: Look Labor has got it right Kate I think I've admitted that I got it wrong in terms of what I said and you know not many Ministers would stand up and make the admission that they got it wrong.

KO: You would think that only Ministers people who were not standing for the election again would do that and that's the situation for you.

MS: No no I've said this all along I've said this all along and it's not just because I'm retiring now. I've come out I've documented, I've put on many websites where there has been this campaign of smear that we were about to remove or I was or I had put in place a policy that was going to remove Aboriginal languages from those remote aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. Now I've admitted way before now that I got it wrong in terms of what I said and I should have made sure instead of pandering to the spin and because it was an important policy it was shaking the very foundations of the Education Department and the education system and saying enough is enough ... Aboriginal kids have to learn but we also have to get them to school every day and you know the whole issue, and that's where Matthew Cranitch and company are so wrong in that they are abrogating their responsibilities to their teachers that they represent, they should be working with the Government to come up with a comprehensive strategy in getting kids to school but we can't get that strategy in place because, you know, whatever you put in place you're always going to have people saying it's too hard. The SEAM trial is there, that could work, that is one strategy that is being done with the Federal Government but you need the resources and you need the support on the ground for that to happen and for the Education Department to constantly say this is a shift or a change, not the Education Department, sorry, the Union. I think that they are misleading people and they need to be honest about this because there hasn't been much honesty in this
debate for a long time.

KO: But there has been a shift, hasn’t there, because as Chris Burns was saying this morning they had a good look at the policy, they took feedback from people in the industry, they relied on research, results from Menzies as well and then he says they clarified the policy, well, if you’re relying on feedback you’re not just clarifying something that already exists your positioning, you’re shifting it.

MS: Kate can I say that I, you know, like it’s it’s like that the previous policy didn’t have any clarification whatsoever or any research or any information in relation to it. When we brought that policy, when I brought Transforming Indigenous Education into plan there was a lot of research that was done on research, the education or the academics aren’t the only ones that read and look at international research. Now this is where I’ve said we need to have a bit of honesty in this debate. If people are honest about the debate about bi-lingual what we have in those communities is not bi-lingual and people need to be honest about that. Bilingual is when you’ve got one teacher in front of the classroom who is truly literate and fluent in both languages. We do not have that in the Northern Territory in our remote Indigenous communities and it is time for people to take a deep breath and to put some honesty in this debate because you know what, it’s not about me, it’s not about Matthew Cranitch or Trish Cross in or Chris Burns at the end of the day, Kate, it’s about those Aboriginal kids getting access to a good education in both their first language and the standard Australian English language and to be able to have choices in their life and you know what, at the moment those kids don’t and it’s a disgrace that everyone uses this as a means of beating Government over the head and saying it’s done a back-flip, it’s not about a back-flip it’s about clarification and trying to get the best outcomes for those communities and those kids.

KO: So just to clarify you just said that at the moment those kids are not getting education in there ... they’re not getting the best start

MS: Look there’s been a number of strategies, there’s been a lot of resources chucked at this issue. There has been Minister after Minister, that has ... this has been a huge dilemma, we all want kids to learn. I don’t think you’ve got to be either a Labor or Liberal Government I think everybody genuinely wants Aboriginal kids to get the best education so that they can have some, you know, there’s got to be choices in a kid’s life and at the moment those choices are limited for our kids and we’ve got, we’ve got to be able to give them that.

KO: So even up ‘til now, you’re saying that the Territory Government, your Labor Government, has failed and is continuing to fail students in the Northern Territory.

MS: Not at all, not at all, no, you’re, you’re, you’re you’re, you’re, you’re twisting my words the wrong way. What I’m saying is way back in the ’90s there was a report called Learning Lessons. Now this was a report that was commissioned by the CLP government because there was a huge dilemma in terms of what they needed to do and the appalling outcomes that they were getting in indigenous education. So they commissioned that report. Now when we came to Government, they wouldn’t implement that report. When we came to Government in 2001 the Labor Government has been trying to implement all of those recommendations and to try and get a better outcome for Aboriginal kids. There has been more investment, now this isn’t spin Kate, there has been serious investment by the Labor Government in terms of infrastructure in those schools. You know places like Maningrida, if you have a look at the infrastructure in that school at the moment and if you have a look
at the photos I’ve got of that school pre-2001, it is a disgrace that people expected kids to go to school under those circumstances so there’s been huge investment in education since 2001. It is a system that is needed building, rebuilding from the ground up over 10 years.

KO: Okay we have to leave it there unfortunately Marion we’ve got to move onto other things but thank you so much for speaking to us this morning, it certainly has been a big discussion I think there is yet some clarification that was worthwhile this morning on this issue I do appreciate it.

MS: No, thankyou Kate for the opportunity to talk about this because it’s an important issue and I think that I’m not saying that Matthew Cranitch or you know anyone else isn’t passionate about this issue I think everybody’s passionate about it but whilst we might all talk to each other as stakeholders the most important stakeholders are those parents and those kids and I wonder whether the Australian Education Union, Trish Crossin and many other criterers, people who have criticised, this have actually sat down with communities, with parents and asked them what they wanted for their kid’s education.

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