

Indigenous MP ruled disorderly for speaking Warlpiri language in parliament

Bess Price, an Aboriginal minister in the Northern Territory calls for Indigenous languages to be used freely in parliament



Government minister and Warlpiri woman Bess Price has called for Indigenous languages to be able to be used in Northern Territory parliament. Photograph: Neda Vanovac/AAP

[Helen Davidson](#)

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An Aboriginal Australian minister has called for the use of Indigenous languages to be freely allowed in parliament, after she was chastised for speaking in Warlpiri during a moment of frustration in a debate.

Bess Price, the [Northern Territory](#) minister for several portfolios including housing and NT statehood, interjected during a debate in December with comments in her first language of Warlpiri. Price, a Warlpiri woman who represents an electorate which is about 75% Indigenous, speaks four languages including English.

The day after Price's interjection the Speaker, Kezia Purick, noted an opposition MP had complained, and gave Price a warning. She said interjections were always disorderly "no matter what language they were in".

Purick noted that people had addressed parliament in a number of other languages in the past, but "for the transaction of everyday business the language of the Assembly is English".

"On that basis, should a member use a language other than English without the leave of the Assembly, it will be ruled disorderly and the member will be required to withdraw the words," Purick said.

Last week Price wrote to Purick challenging her claim that standing orders prevented it, [the ABC reported on Thursday](#). Price called for translation services to be provided in the NT parliament due to the large number of constituents who speak Aboriginal languages as their first language.

The NT's parliamentary standing orders stipulate only that petitions must be presented in English or accompanied by a certified translation. Purick also cited a standing order which prevented the presence of non-members on the floor of the chambers.

“Warlpiri is one of the first languages for the first people of Australia, and Warlpiri to me is the easiest language for me to express myself in,” Price told the ABC.

“I believe our languages should be acknowledged and we are forever and a day having to listen to English being spoken around us.”

In her letter to Purick, Price said she was concerned that parliament “may be seen as not providing mutual respect and parity to our Aboriginal members and constituents”.

She also accused detractors of making “slurs and innuendos insinuating my lack of capacity to contribute to debate”.

Price has been outspoken on issues like domestic violence in Indigenous communities, and was a supporter of the federal government's intervention into the Northern Territory, but has also been criticised for her performance as a minister and [accused of not knowing her briefs](#).

“Aboriginal MLA's who speak traditional languages can lack the confidence they need to take part in debates effectively,” she wrote. “I am concerned this ruling may inadvertently silence traditional Aboriginal Territorians in the chamber, discouraging their involvement in political processes.”

Price sought permission to speak in Warlpiri should she see fit, with an English translation. Purick rejected the notion.

“The existing practice in the Assembly is that order is maintained by all members speaking in English except for where leave ... is granted,” Purick said.

“With the number of Aboriginal languages and dialects within the Northern Territory if we were to permit speaking in Aboriginal languages as a matter of course during the routine of business, we could not choose to be just bilingual, it would be a multilingual parliament where every Aboriginal language could be spoken freely.”

She said it would be a complex and costly exercise, and wrote that she was not convinced that requiring members to communicate in a common language represented an inequality. She noted that 34 Indigenous politicians had served in the NT parliament.

“The Northern Territory is a unique jurisdiction with a proud history of Aboriginal participation,” she said.

“We are the only Australian parliament to have members with Aboriginal heritage elected at every general election held.”

Purick suggested a number of ways Price could seek to have standing orders changed, including referring the matter to the standing orders committee.

Price and Purick have been contacted for comment.