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OPEN LETTER

29 March 2010

Mr Alex Jones
President
Deafness Forum of Australia

Dear Alex,

Deaf Australia would like to request a meeting with Deafness Forum to discuss the current issue of contention, i.e. representation and self determination of Deaf people who use Auslan and the development of policies about Auslan.

This letter is also being sent to the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to request that FaHCSIA representatives attend this meeting also.

Deaf Australia and Deafness Forum have previously met on three occasions since February 2005 to discuss this issue. These meetings, held behind closed doors, have included a proposed Memorandum of Understanding which outlined each organisation's role and how each would respect the other's role and work co-operatively. This memorandum was never signed because following the meeting Deafness Forum advised it would not accept key elements of it.

At no time has Deaf Australia or anyone representing Deaf Australia ever said we would not work with Deafness Forum.

We have reiterated, time and again, that Deaf people who use Auslan want and need their own representative organisation and have the right to self-representation and self-determination – rights which Deaf people are not able to realize within the Deafness Forum membership and governance structure.

We have requested, time and again, that Deafness Forum respect this right by respecting and deferring to Deaf Australia's role and policies/positions on Auslan and Deaf people who use it. Deafness Forum has continued to decline to do this.

We have now brought this issue out into the open because Deafness Forum is again making statements about Auslan and declining to work co-operatively with Deaf Australia, and further attempts to resolve the issue quietly were obviously futile.

While this issue has remained at a stalemate, Deaf Australia has continued to work collaboratively with Deafness Forum on issues of concern to both Deaf people and hard

of hearing people, most notably captioning, and as recently as Wednesday 24th March 2010 at a joint telecommunications seminar in Brisbane. Deaf Australia has also continued to defer to Deafness Forum on issues that are of major concern to hard of hearing people, most notably hearing augmentation and free hearing aids for people over 21 years of age, even though these issues are also of interest to Deaf people.

Let's be clear about this. Deaf Australia believes that Deaf people, hard of hearing people, parents and service providers need to work together, and Deaf Australia has an ongoing collaborative relationship with many organisations representing these groups. However, it is absolutely vital that Deaf people who use Auslan (and hard of hearing people and parents on behalf of their deaf children) have self-representation and self-determination. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also states this.

It is a question of structures and relationships that respect and enable this self-representation and self-determination.

Deaf Australia was established in 1986 by Deaf people who use Auslan and who had previously tried to work for decades within an organisation basically identical to Deafness Forum (the Australian Deafness Council, which now only exists in two states), and found their voice was not being heard.

Deafness Forum was established in 1993 at the instigation of the Australian Government which wanted an easy "one voice" answer to complex issues, as Governments tend to want, but which are not necessarily in the best interests of all stakeholders.

At the time, Deaf Australia said that we could possibly support an organisation of consumers – i.e., Deaf people and hard of hearing people, but we could not support or be part of a structure that included consumers, service providers and parents. We said that the Deaf voice would be lost within such a structure, because the interests and views of Deaf people who use Auslan are often very different to those of hard of hearing people, parents and service providers.

The fact that our strenuous lobbying on this issue was ignored and Deafness Forum was established to "represent all interests and viewpoints of the Deaf and hearing impaired communities" regardless of Deaf people's views, proved our point from the start – the Deaf voice is lost in an organisation that claims to represent all views.

Deafness Forum's current actions of ignoring Deaf Australia's current requests to respect our policies and our members' stated views on Auslan proves our point yet again – the Deaf voice still cannot be heard within the Deafness Forum structure. Deaf people still cannot have self-representation and self-determination within the Deafness Forum structure.

In fact Deafness Forum has still not contacted Deaf Australia directly on the issue of their proposed Auslan policy. Instead, in an open letter of reply to a number of Deaf Australia's founding board members and past presidents, Deafness Forum has stated that it will not agree to the request that Deafness Forum defer to Deaf Australia and our

policies on issues such as Auslan. You nevertheless stated that Deafness Forum is keen to work with Deaf Australia and suggested that the way for this to happen is for Deaf Australia to use Deafness Forum's forthcoming position statement on Auslan.

This clearly is not in the spirit of collaboration or respecting Deaf people's rights to self-representation and self-determination.

Deaf Australia would like to request a meeting with Deafness Forum to again discuss the issue. Deafness Forum was established at the Australian Government's instigation through an earlier incarnation of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). We therefore are requesting that FaHCSIA attend this meeting and record the discussion.

We would like this meeting to propose a long term solution to this issue so that both Deaf Australia and Deafness Forum can move on and work collaboratively in a way that respects the rights of both Deaf people and hard of hearing people to self-representation and self-determination.

Could you please confirm that Deafness Forum will attend this meeting? We can then arrange dates and logistics.

Please see also the attached letter from the President of the World Federation of the Deaf supporting Deaf Australia's position on this issue.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kyle Miers', written in a cursive style.

Kyle Miers
President

Cc: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.