

# OPEN LETTER

25 March 2010

Mr Alex Jones  
President  
Deafness Forum Australia

Dear Alex,

We the undersigned would like to highlight our grave concerns about recent actions undertaken by the Deafness Forum. We refer specifically to the discussion paper on Auslan which has been circulated widely on YouTube, the Deafness Forum website and member email circulation. It proposes lobbying for Auslan to be recognised as an official language, and has been prepared without any consultation with Deaf Australia, which has been working on this issue for a number of years.

We believe that Deaf Australia is the organisation representing Deaf people in Australia, and that it is inappropriate for the Deafness Forum to take a lead on this issue for the following reasons:

1. There are many international examples of Deaf people and hard-of-hearing people being represented by separate organisations, while working cooperatively on particular issues. The international body of which Deaf Australia is an Ordinary Member is the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD). Hard of hearing groups are represented by the International Federation of the Hard of Hearing (IFHOH) at the international level. The WFD has a 'B' consultative status with the United Nations, which means that on issues relating to Deaf people and sign language, the UN will consult with the WFD. The WFD will in turn consult with its Ordinary Members, including Deaf Australia. There is no such equivalent international organisation for the Deafness Forum.

One example of the collaboration between the WFD and the IFHOH on a number of international issues which affect people with a hearing loss is the agreement (<http://www.ifhoh.org/wfd.htm>) on the terminology to be used, either 'Deaf' or 'hard of hearing' and not 'hearing impaired'. By using the terminology 'hearing-impaired', the Deafness Forum continues to demonstrate its lack of knowledge of this international collaboration and even contravenes this international agreement.

2. Communities around the world, including Deaf communities, have the right to self-determination and self-representation. This is highlighted by the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), which states under item 4.1 (Self-representation in Decision-Making) that "*persons with disabilities should have the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making processes about policies and programmes, including those directly concerning them*" (Preamble (o)). To make the right decisions on behalf of all Deaf people, it is crucial that Deaf people themselves lead decision-making processes, including having the majority in bodies governing their own organisations. National associations of Deaf people are the organisations that have the best knowledge about the challenges Deaf people face, and about the best ways to solve issues and improve the lives of Deaf people.

Deaf people have never had a majority on the Deafness Forum so it is not an organisation which represents 'people who are Deaf and who use Auslan'. Deaf Australia's Position on Representation of Deaf People states that:

*Deaf Australia is the national peak body that represents Deaf people in Australia. It is a **true consumer** organisation: its Constitution requires that its board is wholly comprised of Deaf people who are elected by Deaf members of Deaf Australia...Deaf Australia's representatives who speak on behalf of Deaf people are always Deaf themselves.*

The Deafness Forum was established at the instigation of the Federal Government. Deaf Australia was established by the Deaf community.

We believe the Deafness Forum has a valuable role in Australia, and that it should have a productive relationship with Deaf Australia. The two organisations have shared some useful lobbying partnerships, especially with captioning and telecommunications. There has until recently been a tradition of each organisation allowing the other to take the lead on issues where it has more expertise (as DA has with Auslan) with the other organisation offering support. We are disappointed to see you depart from this tradition on such a significant issue, one that strikes at the heart of the Deaf community.

We would therefore like to endorse the press release from Deaf Australia and ask the Deafness Forum to respect Deaf Australia's role as the national body representing Deaf people who use Auslan, to allow them to take the lead on issues related to Auslan, and to work cooperatively with them to ensure improved conditions for all Deaf and hard of hearing people in Australia.

We ask as a matter of urgency that the Deafness Forum review its current actions on the Auslan discussion paper and liaise with Deaf Australia on the best way forward to ensure that Auslan does become recognised as an official language.

Signed



1. **Robert Adam**, Life Member, Board member/Past President 1989-2003



2. **Colin Allen**, Life Member, Board member/Past President 1988-1999, Board Member, World Federation of the Deaf



3. **Bobbie Blackson**, Board Member/Past President, 1992-1999



4. **Breda Carty**, Life Member, Foundation Board member, 1986-1988



5. **Bruce Muller**, Foundation Secretary/Treasurer, 1986-1988

6. **Carole Noonan**, Foundation member, Board member 1987-1996

CC:-

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