

ABORIGINALS

SUNDAY 17 AUGUST 1975

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THIS WEEKEND I HAVE BEEN IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, WHERE I ATTENDED A UNIQUE AND HISTORIC CEREMONY YESTERDAY AFTERNOON. I HANDED TO REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GURINDJI PEOPLE A LEASE CONFERRING UPON THEM UNDISPUTED RIGHTS TO THEIR ANCIENT TRIBAL LANDS AT WATTIE CREEK. FOR THE FIRST TIME, ABORIGINAL PEOPLE HAVE BEEN GIVEN RIGHTS TO THEIR OWN LAND - LAND WHICH THEIR ANCESTORS FIRST INHABITED MANY THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, AND WHICH WILL HENCEFORTH BE THEIRS IN PERPETUITY.

YOU CAN IMAGINE WHAT A DEEPLY EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE THIS WAS FOR EVERYONE CONCERNED - FOR THE ABORIGINALS THEMSELVES, FOR ME AND MY MINISTERS, FOR AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND FOR REPRESENTATIVES OF OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES WITH A CONCERN FOR OUR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. WE GATHERED NEAR WAVE HILL STATION, WEST OF THE VICTORIA RIVER, SOME 200 MILES NORTH-WEST OF TENNANT CREEK. ALL OF US HAD A VERY KEEN SENSE OF HISTORY IN THE MAKING, OF SOMETHING CRUCIAL TO OUR NATIONAL SPIRIT AND IDENTITY, OF A PROCESS WHOSE ORIGINS STRETCH BACK TO THE VERY BEGINNINGS OF HUMAN SETTLEMENT ON THIS CONTINENT. I KNOW THAT AS QUEENSLANDERS YOU WILL HAVE A PARTICULAR INTEREST IN THIS CEREMONY, BECAUSE THERE ARE MORE ABORIGINALS IN YOUR STATE THAN IN ANY OTHER, AND MORE CONTACT BETWEEN ABORIGINALS AND OTHER AUSTRALIANS.

AS QUEENSLANDERS YOU WILL UNDERSTAND BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE THE DEEP IMPORTANCE OF LAND RIGHTS TO THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. IT IS ONLY WHEN WE MOVE AMONG ABORIGINES, AND LIVE CLOSE TO THE LAND OURSELVES, THAT WE CAN BEGIN TO FEEL THE ENORMOUS SIGNIFICANCE - ALMOST A SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE - OF WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED THIS WEEKEND. IT ISN'T JUST A MATTER OF ABORIGINES WANTING LAND FOR PROFIT OR SECURITY OR PASTORAL DEVELOPMENT - THOUGH CERTAINLY THE LAND IN QUESTION, 1250 SQUARE MILES, WILL BE USED AS A CATTLE STATION. THEY RECOGNISE - AND I THINK MOST AUSTRALIANS HAVE COME TO RECOGNISE - THAT THE WHOLE QUESTION OF LAND RIGHTS GOES TO THE VERY ROOTS OF THE ABORIGINES' RIGHTS AND DIGNITY AS A PEOPLE. THEIR CLAIMS REST ON A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN INSTINCT - THE YEARNING TO BELONG TO THE LAND OF THEIR ANCESTORS, TO FEEL PART OF THEIR TRIBAL AND RACIAL ORIGINS, TO KNOW THEY HAVE A REAL AND LIVING STAKE IN THE LAND WHICH IS SO IMPORTANT TO THEIR CULTURE AND MYTHOLOGY.

UNFORTUNATELY IT HAS TAKEN US A VERY LONG TIME TO RECOGNISE THESE RIGHTS AND BEGIN TO RESTORE THEM TO THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. IT IS JUST NINE YEARS AGO THIS MONTH THAT THE GURINDJI ON WAVE HILL STATION WALKED OFF IN PROTEST AGAINST THEIR LIVING AND EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS. EXACTLY SEVEN YEARS AGO - ON BUDGET DAY IN AUGUST 1968 - I RAISED THE PLIGHT OF THE GURINDJI AS A MATTER OF URGENCY IN THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT. THEIR CLAIM FOR LAND RIGHTS WAS DEBATED IN PARLIAMENT FOR THE FIRST TIME ON THE INITIATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY. THERE FOLLOWED YEARS OF NEGOTIATIONS TO SECURE FOR THE GURINDJI A TITLE TO THEIR LAND. VESTEYS, THE LONDON GROUP OF COMPANIES WHICH HELD THE LEASES TO THE LAND, OFFERED TO SURRENDER SOME OF THE LAND TO THE GURINDJI. THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT DID VERY LITTLE ABOUT IT. AGREEMENT WAS FINALLY REACHED BETWEEN VESTEYS AND MY GOVERNMENT LAST DECEMBER. WE ARE PROVIDING MORE THAN HALF A MILLION DOLLARS TO HELP THE GURINDJIS MOVE THEIR CATTLE AND IMPROVE FACILITIES ON THEIR LAND. I SHOULD SAY THAT VESTEYS HAVE COOPERATED FULLY WITH THE GOVERNMENT AT EVERY STAGE OF THE NEGOTIATIONS. I HOPE THEIR EXCELLENT EXAMPLE WILL BE FOLLOWED BY OTHER HOLDERS OF LEASEHOLD LAND TO WHICH REASONABLE CLAIM BY THE ABORIGINES CAN BE ESTABLISHED.

QUITE CLEARLY OUR OBLIGATION TO THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE DOESN'T END WITH THIS ONE GRANT OF LAND AT WATTIE CREEK. THE WHOLE ISSUE OF LAND RIGHTS IS VAST AND COMPLEX, AND THERE ARE NUMEROUS CLAIMS BY ABORIGINALS FOR LAND IN OTHER PARTS OF AUSTRALIA. ALL THESE CLAIMS WILL HAVE TO BE EXAMINED. ONE OF OUR FIRST ACTS AS A GOVERNMENT WAS TO APPOINT A ROYAL COMMISSION TO ADVISE ON WAYS IN WHICH ABORIGINAL LAND RIGHTS MIGHT BE RECOGNISED. THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF MR JUSTICE WOODWARD'S FIRST REPORT IN JULY 1973 WERE ACCEPTED, IN PRINCIPLE BY THE GOVERNMENT AND TWO REGIONAL LAND COUNCILS WERE ESTABLISHED. WE HAVE PREPARED LEGISLATION, WHICH WILL BE INTRODUCED IN THE COMING BUDGET SESSION, TO GIVE EFFECT TO THE WOODWARD REPORT AND PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE JUST AND ORDERLY TRANSFER OF LAND TO ABORIGINALS WHEREVER THEIR TRIBAL RIGHTS CAN BE PROVED.

I HOPE THERE WILL BE NO RESISTANCE OR OBSTRUCTION TO THIS PROCESS. WE ARE DOING SOMETHING TO REDRESS THE LONG HISTORY OF INJUSTICE AND REPRESSION FROM WHICH ABORIGINALS HAVE SUFFERED. YOU WILL REMEMBER THAT A REFERENDUM WAS CARRIED IN 1967 TO GIVE THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT POWER TO LEGISLATE FOR THE WELFARE OF ABORIGINALS. QUEENSLANDERS, LIKE ALL OTHER AUSTRALIANS, VOTED OVERWHELMINGLY FOR THAT REFERENDUM. THE SAD TRUTH IS THAT FAR TOO LITTLE HAS BEEN DONE TO IMPLEMENT THE SPIRIT OF THAT DECISION. IT IS NOT JUST A MATTER OF GIVING MORE MONEY FOR HOUSING, HEALTH AND EDUCATION - THOUGH CERTAINLY WE HAVE GIVEN MORE MONEY, MUCH MORE MONEY, THAN ANY PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT.

THE REAL PROBLEM IS TO OVERCOME DEEP-SEATED PREJUDICES, OLD HABITS OF DISTRUST AND DISCRIMINATION. I'M AFRAID THAT HERE IN QUEENSLAND DISCRIMINATORY LAWS REMAIN ON THE STATUTE BOOK. THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT HAS PASSED LEGISLATION TO OUTLAW ALL FORMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND LAST YEAR WE BROUGHT IN FURTHER LEGISLATION IN THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENT TO OVERRIDE SPECIFIC DISCRIMINATORY LAWS IN QUEENSLAND. WE DON'T GET ANY PARTICULAR PLEASURE FROM ACTING IN THIS WAY, BUT THE RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS OF THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE - AND AUSTRALIA'S REPUTATION AS A NATION - ARE TOO IMPORTANT FOR THESE OBJECTIONABLE LAWS TO BE TOLERATED. WE MUST USE OUR POWERS TO OVERRIDE THEM - POWERS CONFERRED UPON US IN THE REFERENDUM. AFTER ALL, WE ARE NOT THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT TO FIGHT THESE LAWS. MR GORTON'S GOVERNMENT DID ITS BEST TO GET THEM REMOVED, AND THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT DEFIED MR GORTON'S EFFORTS JUST AS IT'S DEFYING MINE.

SO THE STRUGGLE IS STILL GOING ON - THE STRUGGLE TO GIVE ABORIGINALS FULL EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW, TO IMPROVE THEIR RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES, TO RAISE THEIR STANDARD OF LIVING, TO GIVE THEM TRUE DIGNITY AS A PEOPLE, TO HELP THEM RUN THEIR OWN AFFAIRS AND MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR FUTURE AND THE CONDUCT OF THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES. IT'S A TASK FOR WHICH WE ALL HAVE A PARTICULAR RESPONSIBILITY AS AUSTRALIANS - AND IT'S A TASK WHICH VARIES FROM PLACE TO PLACE, FROM STATE TO STATE, FROM COMMUNITY TO COMMUNITY. THERE ARE NO SIMPLE, ALL-EMBRACING POLICIES FOR ABORIGINAL ADVANCEMENT.

WE HAVE TO WORK STEADILY AND PATIENTLY AND DO WHAT WE CAN, AS BEST WE CAN, WHEREVER IT IS POSSIBLE TO TAKE ACTION. I AM SURE THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF QUEENSLANDERS WILL SUPPORT OUR EFFORTS AND SHARE MY PERSONAL SATISFACTION WITH EVERYTHING THAT WAS ACHIEVED, AND SYMBOLISED, BY YESTERDAY'S CEREMONY AT WATTIE CREEK.

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