

DOORSTOP: PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA (WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES REPORT)

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Question

...report by the World Council of Churches on Aborigines.

Prime Minister

No, I think only to support really what Senator Baume said on ABC this morning. I have not read or studied the report yet. Obviously the Government will be, but I think from the public reports that have come out the report misses the fact that Aboriginal people are not only entitled to all the programmes available to all other Australians, that Governments are in fact operating many programmes specifically designed to help Aboriginal people. We have set in place programmes of Aboriginal self-management. The Development Fund which Charles Perkins heads is an innovation which was hailed by the Aboriginal people as a great advance, giving them control over many facets of their own operations. In addition to this, the idea of self-management rather than of State paternalism is one which I think is very important in Australia and one which, as I understand it, is supported by Aboriginal people. So, whether these matters are covered in the report or not I do not know, but the press reports so far of the report seem to pay no attention to the very extensive efforts by Governments to improve the circumstances of the Aboriginal people. I have said publicly in other places that Australia was late in the day in starting. I think Paul Hasluck was the first Minister who really began to introduce programmes that would improve the well-being of Aboriginal people. We could well have argued we should have started 50 or 60 or 70 years ago instead of 20 or 30 years ago. But very significant strides have in fact been made over recent times.

Question

In light of what you say are omissions in the report, do you think your Government could be embarrassed.

Prime Minister

I am saying I have not studied the report, so I do not know whether these matters which I have mentioned are in fact covered in the report or not.

Question

Well that aside, do you think your Government could be embarrassed by circulation of the report at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting?

Prime Minister

No, I do not. I do not really because I think many people who are coming to that meeting understand and know the policies that are being pursued by this particular Government. The problems are by no means unique to Australia. They are shared in a number of countries in a number of places. It needs to be understood that programmes of health, programmes of education, programmes in housing designed specifically to support the Aboriginal people are very real ones. They are not the paternalistic State-managed programmes of older days saying "this is what is good for you". They are programmes that seek to involve Aboriginal people in their own self-management and self-determination within Australian society. All of that is good in Australian policy. Nobody can pretend and nobody suggests that some of the very real difficulties in this area can be resolved in a day or a week. It is going to take time. I have said on a number of occasions over recent years that Australia was late in the day in starting but over the last 20 years in particular very great progress has been made and we are doing what we can to make up for lost time.

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