

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
 MR. E.G. WHITLAM
 AT THE OPENING OF A NATIONAL SEMINAR ON ABORIGINAL ARTS AUSTRALIAN
 NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
 21 MAY 1973

ABORIGINAL ARTS

There could be no more appropriate meeting place for this seminar than the Coombs Lecture Theatre of this university. I do not need to tell you of the dedicated and untiring service Dr. Coombs has given to both the arts and the Aboriginal people of this country. This seminar brings together two of the great causes to which he has devoted much of his distinguished career as an Australian public servant. I pay tribute to his energy, his zeal and his humanity.

There can be no qualification about my Government's commitment to the cause of the Aboriginal people. We are determined that the long record of injustice, repression, neglect, the record that has marked our treatment of the Aboriginal people for two centuries of white civilisation on this continent, will be brought to an end. Let there be no mistaking our sincerity. Above all, let there be no mistaking our motives. Our commitment to the Aboriginal people is no token gesture to modish theories, no easy device to improve the "image" of white Australia overseas, no comfortable sop to world opinion. We regard the Aboriginals' rights and dignity as more important than the white man's reputation. I repeat what I said in my policy speech last November: "The Aborigines are a responsibility we cannot escape, cannot share, cannot shuffle off." In 1967 the Australian people, by an overwhelming majority at a referendum, gave the national Government an overriding responsibility for the welfare of the Aboriginal people. Nothing was done to implement that responsibility in any way that would not have been possible before that referendum was passed. We will accept that responsibility; we regard it as a sacred trust.

The Labor Government has many plans and many ambitions for the Australian people. But if there is one ambition we place above all others, if there is one achievement for which I hope we will be remembered, if there is one cause for which I hope future historians will salute us, it is this: That the Government I lead removed a stain from our national honour and gave justice and equality to the Aboriginal people.

My Government intends to restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia the power to make their own decisions about their way of life within the Australian community. We know that most Aboriginal Australians are proud of their heritage, of their long history and of the traditions and culture which have been handed down to them. We know that most of them, in all parts of Australia, want to preserve their identity as distinctive groups within an Australian society which respects and honours that identity.

Accordingly we see this seminar as an important expression of the Government's intention. It has been arranged by the newly-established Board for Aboriginal Arts within the Australian Council for the Arts. This Board is composed exclusively of Aborigines and is presided over by your chairman, Mr. Dick Roughsey. That board has decided who was to be invited to participate in the seminar. That board will determine the conduct of the seminar's proceedings. I am glad to see that the majority of those present are themselves Aborigines and that those who are not, are men and women of goodwill whose knowledge and experience will be of value in your deliberations. Important among these are distinguished representatives of ethnic groups from New Zealand, the United States and Africa, to whom I extend a special welcome.

We expect that the work of the seminar will guide the Aboriginal Arts Board in the policies it will develop. My Government intends that the Board will receive greatly increased financial resources so that it can do its work effectively.

The Board will be concerned to support and stimulate the traditional arts of the Aboriginal people. Gradually, white Australians have become aware of the richness and diversity of these arts - of the bark paintings, the rock carvings and paintings, of the mime, the dancing and the music of the dramatic presentation of traditional myths and stories, of the great song cycles which celebrate the adventures of totemic ancestors in the dream-time. What has tended to be forgotten is that these examples of the cultural heritage of the Aboriginal people have their source in, and derive their inspiration from, the deeply spiritual ceremonial which is of the essence of the Aboriginal way. I hope your seminar will explore this relationship so that the Board's support may be given in ways which respect and enrich the ceremonial foundations as well as the works of the artists which spring from it.

It has been fashionable to regard Aboriginal arts as a rigidly unchanging repetition of forms laid down in times immemorial. I believe this is a mistake. There is ample evidence of the influence of change - in subject matter, in materials, in style and purpose. Truly it is an ordered change within a stable but developing tradition. I do not think we should regard Aboriginal arts as a museum piece, but rather as a vigorous expression of the vitality of the Aboriginal way, changing as it will from the effects of outside influences and from its own internal vitality. Authenticity depends upon the arts still being rooted in, and enlivened by, the true spirit of the Aboriginal people rather than by adherence to unchanging forms.

There are many Aboriginal Australians whose links with the traditions of their ancestors have been broken or become tenuous. Many live in towns and cities, facing the problems of isolation, of prejudice, and a multitude of social and economic handicaps. For them, the arts will take much from white society, and from other racial groups in style and technique. They will be seen in part as a means whereby urban Aborigines are frequently an expression of protest and that they learn much from protest in similar forms from minorities the world over. Such

social protest is a proper purpose of the arts and I hope that the Aboriginal Arts Board will strengthen the capacity of urban communities to make their voices heard. Artists are not only those who see and feel most intensely the agonies, the sorrows and the hopes of their own people: They are those who can bring to others the willingness and capacity to comprehend and share these emotions. I have been struck by the distinctively Aboriginal style which is emerging in the writing, the theatre, the visual arts of urban Aboriginal artists. I hope this style will be brought to full flower in the coming years.

Mr. Roughsey, you and your fellows here in this seminar have before you an exciting task and as historic opportunity. I wish you well in your deliberations. I pledge the support of the Australian Government for the plans which I am sure will emerge from them.

I have much pleasure in declaring open this National Seminar on Aboriginal Arts.

.....