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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
FOR THE OPENING OF THE 17TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
OF THE FEDERAL COUNCIL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF  
ABORIGINES & TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS  
CANBERRA, FRIDAY 28 MARCH, 1975

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It is taking a long time to redress the long history of injustice to our Aboriginal people. In no field of Government are good intentions more easily subverted by practical difficulties and human failings. My Government has done a great deal for your people, but I am not going to pretend that the plight of Aborigines has been removed or even greatly alleviated. It has not. If increased Government expenditures, the passage of enlightened legislation and the creation of new agencies were all that were needed, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders would now be enjoying much happier prospects for a full and better life. The truth is that we are dealing with perverse and intractable things like human nature, deeply ingrained cultural and social habits, the legacy of decades of neglect and generations of repression. In recent weeks in parts of the Northern Territory we have seen a depressing and lamentable resurgence of the worst strains of prejudice and racism. Your struggle, our struggle, will be long and difficult. I can only say this: throughout that struggle the Australian Labor Government will be on your side.

And for all the difficulties we face the important thing is not to lose faith in the power of Governments to bring about change and improvement. True enough, the road is hard and full of obstacles but when a national Government is behind you there is hope, and there are real gains. We should never forget the resounding victory Aboriginal people secured in the referendum of 1967. That result gave the Australian Government concurrent powers with the States, and where necessary overriding powers, in respect of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. It was an unmistakable affirmation of the people's will. And it was - if you will forgive the phrase - very much a victory for centralism. We might well ponder what the result of such a referendum would be today. Would the Opposition senators and the States resist such a referendum in their current obsession with State rights? Would the referendum be carried so decisively? The lesson to keep in mind is that reforms of this kind - reforms so crucial to your welfare and crucial to Australia's reputation - can easily be frustrated or set aside even when the people approve them.

Of course none of us can be content with the progress of Aboriginal welfare since the referendum was carried. At least one State is still resisting the clear instruction given by that result, just as they resisted the efforts of our predecessors to give effect to the people's verdict. It is easily forgotten that Queenslanders themselves voted overwhelmingly for the referendum. Yet discriminatory laws remain on the statute book in Queensland. Mr. Gorton did his best to remove them. The State Government defied him. And of course they have defied my own Government's attempts. In November 1973 we first brought in a bill to outlaw all forms of racial discrimination; it is still before the Parliament. Our Human Rights Bill had a similar objective and has met with similar obstruction. Last year we introduced a further bill to override specific discriminatory Queensland laws by legislation in the national Parliament. I find it intolerable that Queensland's discriminatory laws remain in force eight years after the referendum was passed, in the face of the people's wishes, in the face of the expressed policy of the two major political parties in Australia.

I would not want you to think that we see Aboriginal affairs as solely a national Government responsibility. Your own council is organised on federal lines and our approach requires a good measure of co-operation with the States. Where the States have constitutional authority in such matters as health and education, we have sought the co-operation of State Ministers and their departments.

So what we are doing is enabling Aboriginal communities and groups to meet their own needs and look after themselves. This year we are spending \$13 million to fund Aboriginal Housing Associations so they can build and buy houses. We are funding Aboriginal medical services in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia. Aboriginal legal services have been established in all States and the Northern Territory. We have set up the Aboriginal Loans Commission to provide loans to Aboriginals for business enterprises, and have prepared legislation to make it easier for Aboriginal communities and groups to incorporate for economic and social purposes.

One of the Government's major reforms was to set up the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, a national body to which Aborigines may elect representatives to advise the minister on policies and programs. We want the committee to promote the autonomy and independence of the Aboriginal people and help them maintain distinctive cultures.

For the same reason we established an Aboriginal Arts Board within the Australia Council, and it is generously funded to encourage traditional and developing Aboriginal arts. We have introduced bilingual education courses in Northern Australia so that Aboriginal children can be taught in their own dialects.

The Government has recognised from the start that land rights are central to your aspirations, your dignity and your place in a just social order. One of the Government's first actions in December 1972 was to freeze mineral exploration and land leasing in Northern Territory reserves and appoint a Royal Commission to advise on ways in which Aboriginal land rights might best be recognised. After Mr. Justice Woodward's first report in July 1973, two regional Land Councils were set up and, largely on the basis of submissions from these Councils, a final report and recommendations were submitted in May 1974. The recommendations were accepted in principle by Government. Legislation is being drafted for introduction in the present session after further consultations with the Land Councils.

The Aboriginal Land Fund Act was introduced and passed later in 1974. It establishes a fund for the purchase by Aboriginal communities of land for economic and social purposes and for a Commission to administer the Fund. At least two of the five members of the Commission will be Aboriginal. A number of large properties have been bought by Aboriginal communities since 1972 on the basis of funds provided by grant by the Government.

Arrangements are being made for the surrender this year of over 1,200 square miles from Wave Hill Station for the Gurindji community at Wattie Creek in terms of the group's original request in 1967 so that the Gurindji can raise cattle on their own land.

On top of that we have provided vastly greater sums for Aboriginal housing, health, education and employment. Here's a comparison to bear in mind. In 1971-72 the last full year of Liberal-Country Party Government, Commonwealth spending on Aboriginal affairs amounted to \$ 32 million. This financial year we are spending \$164 million. But don't imagine that because of this we are ignorant of the problems still facing you. The very generosity of our grants has brought difficulties of funding and accounting for many of your people. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs has redeployed its staff to cope with the pressure of demand. We know, too, that rural areas, where many Aborigines live, have been hard hit by unemployment and there are special problems of employment for Aborigines in more remote areas. All this, regrettably, puts abnormal strains on relationships with white communities.

I hope your own council will help remove these sources of tension. Despite the establishment of other Aboriginal bodies there will always be a need for your organisation in promoting understanding of Aboriginal needs and putting forward sound, practical and enlightened policies.

You have campaigned with us on many fundamental issues - the 1967 referendum, the removal of discriminatory legislation, land rights for your people. Those battles are mainly won. You can be sure of our continued support as we move towards the achievement of our other goals. Don't be disappointed by inevitable setbacks and delays, by administrative difficulties, by the problems posed by your new responsibilities and your new sense of independence. We are working steadily, patiently and surely towards a better way of life for the Aboriginal people. In Jim Cavanagh we have a minister with great common sense and great humanity. He is tackling practical problems without losing sight of ideals. There will always be groups with a vested interest in obstruction and mischief. There will always be those, in both the Aboriginal and white communities, with a vested interest in tension, confrontation, even violence. It is important to resist them, to get on with the job in our own way, to keep clear and practical goals before us, to be on guard against bombast and hysteria. I ask the Aboriginal people to put their faith in a Government with their true interests at heart, and ultimately to have faith in yourselves.

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