



EMBARGO: 10.00 a.m.  
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

## PRIME MINISTER

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### ADDRESS AT NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CONFERENCE

The establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Development and now this inaugural meeting of the National Aboriginal Conference effectively sets the seal on a real turning point in the development and administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs in Australia.

Let this be the year when, whatever else we may be able to do, Australia finally achieves real equality of man with man, equality of opportunity, black with white, equality of all Australians before the law.

The past history of the Aboriginal people since the white settlement in Australia has been marked by neglect, deprivation, grinding poverty and persecution. While not wishing to dwell on past events neither should we forget them. These events occurred because of the unthinking treatment of Aboriginals as at best second class citizens - disqualified from equal treatment with other Australians because their colour was not white, because their culture was not European. Some people even tried to rationalise these abhorrent practices with half-baked arguments that Aboriginals were somehow inferior, that it was justifiable to treat Aboriginals with complete disregard for their human rights and liberties.

In their ignorance and prejudice they ignored the rich and complex culture built up by Aboriginals over thousands of years. This attitude of wanton discrimination was not simply misconceived and pernicious, it physically degraded those who suffered at its hands. Even more, it morally degraded those who practiced it.

The denial of fundamental human rights to any group in a society diminishes that society. We must all be resolved that such discrimination and bigotry will never happen again. All Australians are entitled to be treated equally under the law whatever their colour, whatever their race. All are entitled to equal respect and equal protection. The Government is resolved to put to an end the hurt, indifference and intolerance which almost destroyed the Australian Aboriginals and their culture..

We are committed to ending the offensive paternalism of past policies, and we will oppose to the utmost the remnants of bigotry and intolerance towards Aboriginals still existing in our society. We will continue to pursue programmes which encourage Aboriginals to control their own affairs. Our basic commitment is that all Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders be as free as other Australians to determine their own varied futures. For it is this basic right which is essential for the building up of their sense of pride and self-esteem. Aboriginals have the fundamental right to choose whether to retain their distinctive traditional identity and culture, or, if they wish, to adopt partially or wholly a European lifestyle.

The key feature of the Government's policy regarding Aboriginal advancement is summed up in the term "self-management". It was never good enough for politicians or bureaucrats whether at the State or Federal level to impose on the Aboriginal people their conception of what was good for the Aboriginal people. Aboriginals have the same right as every Australian citizen to determine what is best for them. That is why the work of this Conference is so important. I look to this Conference to be a forum for open expression, both in bringing forward new and creative ideas, and in evaluating existing programmes. You have the opportunity to articulate the needs of those whose voices may not otherwise be heard.

One of the greatest challenges which will face you as members of this Conference will be to help us in devising effective social programmes which can bring an end to the cycle of poverty, sickness and loss of dignity still to be found in many Aboriginal communities. We have adopted a community-based approach to funding to ensure that the needs of communities are met in a coordinated way. The underlying theme of current spending in all Departments on Aboriginal projects - some \$176 million this year - is the directing of resources into areas of greatest need in order to make the best use of available funds. To enable this to be done, the Government has established a programme to obtain accurate profiles of all Aboriginal communities so that their needs can be assessed and priorities properly determined. We wish to see Aboriginals exercising an increasing influence at national, regional and community levels in the determination of these priorities. Participation by yourselves in area and community programming conferences will help us to achieve this goal.

Of course, money alone is not the solution to problems of dispossession and dispersal, persecution and discrimination, all of which have contributed to a substantial denial for Aboriginals of the right and means to live their lives according to their own values.

One measure which will make, I believe, a significant contribution to restoring pride and justice to Aboriginals is the Northern Territory Land Rights legislation. This Act, which closely follows the recommendations of Mr Justice Woodward's Land Rights Commission, recognises the fact that the cultural identity and lifestyle of Aboriginal communities is inextricably bound up with their land. The Government will, in the next few weeks,

be taking further legislative action to ensure that title to Aboriginal reserves in the Northern Territory will pass to Aboriginal land trusts in the very near future.

On the matter of Aboriginal communities on Mornington Island and at Aurukun, I should say that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Ian Viner, will be reporting to Cabinet later today on his recent visit there. I can assure you the Government has taken very seriously the recent developments at Aurukun and Mornington Island, and we will be giving the highest priority at Cabinet today to consideration of the Minister's report. The Commonwealth has a Constitutional obligation to Aboriginals. These communities have turned to us. We will not fail them.

We are taking other steps too, which will help translate self-management into reality. We are developing plans for a National Training Programme so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can develop the necessary skills to manage effectively their community's affairs. We are examining the need to increase the number of Aboriginal health workers as a means of providing Aboriginal communities with more effective health care services. We are proceeding with a programme of community based health services. We are employing Aboriginal administrators for the most successful trachoma eradication programme under which so far more than 60,000 persons have been examined - a programme which, I am glad to say, is to resume shortly in Queensland. More funds are being allocated in helping Aboriginals in the prevention and control of alcohol abuse. The National Employment Strategy for Aboriginals announced last year is assisting Aboriginals in remote areas to find work. The National Aboriginal Education Committee which we have established is providing a range of expertise in this area of education and a special understanding of Aboriginal needs and problems in education.

In all these areas there is one unavoidable fact that must be faced. Because of generations of neglect and discrimination against Aboriginals in education, health, employment and housing, it will take a long term effort to overcome all the present disadvantages. It will require persistence and determination for all - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - who are genuinely concerned about Aboriginal welfare to see that present hopes and initiatives are transformed into reality.

This Conference has the opportunity - and indeed the responsibility - to provide to Government a significant input in the planning and implementation of policies and programmes which affect Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. I believe this can be done in a spirit of goodwill and cooperation on all sides.

Throughout all our work together we must never forget that any policy based on the superiority of one race over another is a policy doomed to failure. Just as the Government's policies towards Southern Africa are founded on this fundamental principle so in Australia we must achieve nothing less than real equality of all Australians - equality of rights, equality of opportunities, equality of protection under the law.

Madame Chairman, I have much pleasure in formally declaring the first annual meeting of the National Aboriginal Conference open, and I wish you well in the deliberations you have ahead during the next few days.

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