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ADDRESS TO THE NEW NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CONFERENCE

It gives me great pleasure to offer to you, Mr Chairman, my congratulations on your election, and to welcome the new National Aboriginal Conference as the major body to advise the Commonwealth Government on Aboriginal views.

While I have not yet met many of your new members, the work of the N.A.C. needs no introduction to me or to the community at large. In the four years since its first elections, the N.A.C. has proved to be a particularly valuable forum for discussion of Aboriginal views, and a channel by which these views are communicated to government.

The standing and significance of the N.A.C. amongst the Aboriginal community is indicated by the recent elections. There were 251 candidates, and more than 34,000 electors voted. The new N.A.C. will be taking on a significantly expanded role as it assumes the functions of the former Council for Aboriginal Development. The energy and dedication of the N.A.C. in promoting the interests of Aboriginal people has taken on new dimensions with its increasingly wide involvements. In particular, the Third Assembly of the World Council of Indigenous People, which was hosted by the N.A.C., was one of the particularly significant international events held in Australia during the course of the year.

You and your executive especially will have a great deal of contact with the Minister - and, as you know, there is a commitment for myself and Cabinet Ministers to meet with your executive. The Government, and particularly the Minister, value the advice which we receive from the N.A.C.. Our task in achieving the objective of promoting the well-being of the Aboriginal people, an objective the N.A.C. has supported so strongly, would be so much more difficult without your contribution.

Against that background of common objective, I can say we have not always agreed on every issue in the past - and we will not always agree in the future. This is to be expected, and it is healthy. You would be failing in your duty if you were not to be pointing out the shortcomings in policy and pressing us to do more. Nevertheless, there is much common ground between us and many tasks which we do and must share.

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It is about what we have in common that I would like to talk today. Much has been said of the problems. The Government has been accused by some people of ignoring them. Let me say quite categorically that the Government is fully aware of the problems - and that our policies are designed to overcome disadvantage. It would, however, be short-sighted not to learn from, and build on the more positive experiences of recent years with the aim of overcoming disadvantage.

At the outset, I should state our objectives in Aboriginal affairs - objectives which I think you will generally accept. The Commonwealth believes that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders should have the same opportunity as other Australians to determine their own varied lifestyles - and be able to live as independent, self-sustaining citizens. The Commonwealth believes that Aboriginals should have the same access to Government services as do other Australian citizens, and that additional services appropriate to their state of disadvantage should also be provided. As recognition of the past dispossession and dispersal of the Aboriginal people the Commonwealth seeks to promote their development, self-management and self-sufficiency. The Commonwealth believes Aboriginal culture is an intrinsic part of Australian heritage, something of value to all Australians - and that Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders should be able to retain and develop their traditions, language and culture wherever this is their wish.

I believe the Government's record clearly demonstrates our commitment to these objectives, a commitment which I am sure is being supported by the community at large. The very act of establishing the N.A.C. is clear recognition that Aboriginals should have greater control over their lives and over policies affecting them. In similar vein, the Government last year established the Aboriginal Development Commission, a body which has taken on a fundamental role in promoting Aboriginal management. We made the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act a reality, and since 1976 some 27% of the Northern Territory has come under Aboriginal freehold ownership.

In a general atmosphere of budgetary restraint the Budget allocation for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has, this financial year, been increased by some 16% to \$147 million. The aggregate of spending by all Government Departments on programmes specifically for Aboriginals will be some \$228 million in 1981/82.

In the key area of health, grants to Aboriginal organisations for health services have doubled in real terms since 1976. We have committed \$50 million over the next five years to projects to improve public health facilities to Aboriginal communities, and our Aboriginal medical services have been the subject of much international interest.

This year, some \$78 million will be provided for Aboriginal housing, and \$72 million will be provided for education, employment and training. With regard to the question of self-management, the Aboriginal Development Commission has \$50 million available to it this year. 75% of the funds available to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for Aboriginal advancement programmes will be allocated to direct grants to Aboriginal-managed organisations.

From the objectives which we share arise a number of tasks on which it is essential that we work together. Perhaps the most fundamental is the continued development of measures to assist Aboriginal people which are effective and capable of implementation. Understandably, Aboriginal expectations for change are high. The Government too would like to abolish the disadvantage experienced by many Aborigines.

However, the experience of recent years shows that although significant progress can be made there is no single or quick solution - no matter how much money is spent. The neglect of almost two centuries cannot be undone immediately. To say otherwise would be to underestimate the nature and extent of the problems.

In addition, the Commonwealth Government is not the only body which provides assistance to Aborigines or which affects their interests. State Governments have primary responsibility in areas such as land, health, and education and the services and activities of local governments and private agencies and interests also affect Aboriginal people in many ways. It is essential then that the approach to the task should be on a co-operative basis if best advantage is to be made of the resources available.

The Commonwealth when necessary has presented Aboriginal views to State Governments, and has also been involved with private enterprise, through, for example, promotion of employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. Let me add that the N.A.C. itself can play an important role in putting forward views and in helping to establish the dialogue needed in areas for which the Commonwealth is not primarily responsible. A further joint task to which I think all political parties and the N.A.C. must give attention is increasing the awareness and understanding of Aboriginal culture and lifestyles.

The community in general recognises the overwhelming disadvantage experienced by many Aborigines and the need for special assistance. However, there is a continuing need to educate the community - to explain our policies and the reasons for them. In this context, I feel I should make the point that little purpose is served in bandying around generalised allegations about the Australian people or various governments. Not by abuse and hostility will we win the support of people who have failed to give due regard to Aboriginal concerns and interests, but by persuasion and education because your cause is just.

The third major task on which I think we are in agreement is the need to be aware of what Aboriginal people, individual Aboriginals think. We have encouraged self-management because we believe that Aboriginal people know their own priorities and needs better than government, and we are concerned that our policies should be responsive to Aboriginal wishes.

We established the N.A.C. because it was recognised that for a number of reasons Aboriginal people have found it difficult to put their views to government. We look to the N.A.C. to tell us what people at the grass-roots are thinking and saying. Representing all Aboriginals, many of whom would otherwise in practice have no voice on such matters, is a most important task of the N.A.C.

In discussing Aboriginal affairs we necessarily concentrate on the problems but far too seldom is recognition given to the successes. For example, those Aborigines who have achieved prominence and distinction in various fields, the Aboriginal students in tertiary education, and successful Aboriginal enterprises.

I hope the N.A.C. will help to raise awareness of the achievements and successes of Aboriginals to show the community that when Aboriginals are given equal opportunities they take them, that our programmes for Aboriginal advancement represent money well spent.

I think a fitting note to conclude on is the subject of the Makarrata - "a coming together after a period of hostilities". I know that it is something to which you attach considerable significance - the Government too regards the concept as an important development. I should like to think that such a coming together is being achieved now. We do not know at this stage what form the Makarrata will finally take and there is clearly a great deal of work still to be done.

Nevertheless, the concept is a valuable one which we would like to continue to pursue. I hope what I have said may contribute in some small way to this. Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, you have a very important and in many ways a difficult task confronting you.

The Government will stand with you, sharing with you as it does the objective of promoting the well-being and self-realisation of the Aboriginal people. On behalf of the Government, I wish you and everyone associated with the N.A.C. every success with your endeavours.