



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
ROCKHAMPTON ABORIGINAL CULTURAL CENTRE
ROCKHAMPTON - 9 APRIL 1988**

Your invitation to me to open the Rockhampton Aboriginal Cultural Centre was welcome because it gives me an opportunity to deliver two important messages.

First, I want to congratulate you on the tremendous spirit of co-operation and endeavour with which you have created this new Centre.

Second, I want to talk about a spirit of co-operation and endeavour at the national level - namely, the new process of consultation currently taking place between the Federal Government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this nation.

Today is truly a proud day for Rockhampton because we are celebrating the opening of a new centre in whose creation many parts of the Rockhampton community have played a role.

The Rockhampton City Council, the local College of TAFE, service clubs and individual citizens can all take a share of the credit.

The Federal and Queensland Governments each contributed more than \$450,000 to the cost of the Centre, as part of the Commonwealth-State Bicentennial Commemorative Program.

But all these efforts depended on the original idea and the determined commitment of the local Aboriginal community - and in particular the members of the Central Queensland Aboriginal Corporation for Cultural Activities.

What all these efforts have combined to produce is a building of very great significance:

- . it will be an important tourist attraction for local, interstate and international visitors;
- . it will help ensure that Aboriginal people retain their culture as a living thing for the inspiration and education of us all; and

- through the cooperative spirit with which the Centre was built, it will serve as a lesson on how to get things done, together - a lesson from which all Australians in our multicultural nation could learn.

As I said, the Federal Government has contributed money to this Centre under a joint Commonwealth-State Bicentenary program.

The Rockhampton Aboriginal Cultural Centre thus belongs to the significant group of projects being funded for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of the Bicentennial celebrations.

We ought to be under no illusion that for the Aboriginal people, 1788 signalled the end of an era.

It brought to an end the more than 40,000 year long era of continuous unchallenged occupation of this land by Aboriginal people - 40,000 years during which there flourished here a rich civilisation, which many of the first European settlers - and many of their successors - were simply not equipped to appreciate adequately or even to understand.

So it is significant that at Rockhampton today we are in a small way correcting those failures. We are celebrating the public commencement of a building which will be a lasting display case for that civilisation, in which its achievements and its richness can be fully recognised and more widely understood.

So it is very appropriate that this Centre has received Bicentennial funding, and I am very pleased as Prime Minister, on behalf of all Australians, to be able to participate in this opening.

But the Bicentennial holds a wider meaning for those of us - I hope all of us - who are concerned about a proper recognition of the role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today.

Because I have made it clear right from the start of this Bicentennial year, and before, that Australians could not properly celebrate the Bicentenary without coming to a better understanding of, and understanding with, the Aboriginal people.

By that I mean that the two hundred years of European settlement of Australia have been characterised by all too frequent failure, on the part of the Governments and the non-Aboriginal community, to meet the legitimate needs of the Aboriginal people.

In our Bicentenary year, we should not only reflect on the richness of a 40,000 year old culture.

We should also, more fundamentally, respond to the real needs of the Aboriginal people:

- to participate more equitably in the affairs of our community, and
- to benefit more effectively from the fruits of our prosperity.

The groundwork for such a response was laid two decades ago when the Australian people voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to give the Commonwealth the power to make laws regarding the Aboriginal and Islander people.

The essential feature of such a Government response must be that its elements are agreed to, through consultation, by the Aboriginal and Islander people themselves.

Accordingly, the Federal Government is undertaking a number of initiatives aimed at increasing Aboriginal self-management and economic independence.

As the Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Gerry Hand, said in a Statement to Parliament last December outlining these new initiatives, Aboriginal people need to decide for themselves what should be done - not just take whatever governments think or say is best for them.

So underlying our proposed new measures is the most extensive series of consultations with Aboriginal people undertaken by any Government.

Gerry Hand recently concluded the first round of these consultations.

Between January 23 and March 10, he attended 46 meetings involving an estimated 6,000 people representing some 1,200 organisations. Preceding these meetings were 450 community meetings held in 415 locations which enabled Aboriginal and Islander groups to work through the proposals Mr Hand would put to them.

Many of you here will have been present at the Rockhampton meeting on February 27.

Foremost among the subjects discussed in these consultations was the proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, which I believe offers a new and exciting era in Aboriginal Affairs in this country.

For the first time, under this new Commission, Aboriginal people will be involved in setting the priorities and making the decisions that affect them.

This will largely be achieved through a national network of Regional Councils, whose representatives will be Aboriginal and Islander people elected by their own communities.

These Councils will then elect their own Commissioners within specified zones. The Board of Commissioners will be entirely made up of Aboriginal and Islander people and the majority will be elected by the people, not appointed by the government as is currently the situation.

The result - and it is an encouraging result - from Mr Hand's consultations with Aboriginal and Islander people is that the overwhelming majority endorsed the new Commission "in principle" even though they suggested ways in which the proposal could be improved.

As a result of this first round of consultations an Options Paper is now being circulated in a series of follow up meetings which will continue over the next few weeks.

The second principal subject of consultation was the proposal to reach a compact or treaty between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Mr Hand found in his consultation that Aboriginal people were discussing the idea of a compact or treaty on an informal level.

He stressed that the first step towards establishing such an agreement is for Aboriginal people to convey to the Government their view on how the process of discussing the concept should be set in place.

We hope to get that process of formal discussion underway this year but the Minister has also stressed - and I agree with him - that we will not rush anybody into this.

I have always believed that the Bicentenary provides an appropriate context in which serious work towards an agreement should be begun.

But the matter is too important to be jeopardised by unnecessary haste.

While work on this restructuring takes place, the Government is also making progress on issues of immediate relevance to Aboriginal living standards.

Aboriginal unemployment persists at unacceptably high levels - five or six times higher than among non-Aboriginals. Aboriginal incomes remain on average only half those enjoyed by other Australians.

Accordingly the Federal Government has established the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy. With a substantial financial commitment by the Commonwealth, we seek to achieve employment equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

In the area of health, Aboriginal people are again severely disadvantaged by comparison to the wider-community. Infant mortality rates, while declining, are still about three times higher, and life expectancy rates are some 20 years lower, than for non-Aboriginals.

We have established a joint Federal-State working party to prepare a strategy to tackle these and similar health problems.

In neither the employment nor the health field will it be possible to find easy or rapid solutions.

But both of them demand action. Indeed, since ultimately the root cause of both of them can be traced back to that day in 1788 when European settlement of Australia began, it is essential that we take steps this year to begin resolving them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The legislation with which the Federal Government, subject to approval by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, proposes to establish the new Commission, will contain a very important introduction.

This introduction, or preamble, is written in formal Parliamentary style so I won't read it out here. But its basic points, as currently proposed, are easy to summarise -

- the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were the prior occupiers and original owners of this land and they were dispossessed, without compensation, of that ownership;
- Aborigines consequently are the most disadvantaged group in Australia; and
- Australians want policies and programs which will overcome the economic and social disadvantage of the Aboriginal people, which will entitle them to enjoy their culture and their traditional laws where practicable, and which will enable them with pride and dignity to achieve full recognition and status within the Australian nation.

This is not a mere assembly of words. It is important language describing important goals.

Achieving those goals will require continued co-operation and understanding by all Australians - the same kind of co-operation and understanding which allowed this Cultural Centre to be built.

It is my hope that a wider application of that spirit will help create the conditions for a fuller realisation of the proper relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Australia.

It is with that hope that I now declare this Cultural Centre open.
