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**PRIME MINISTER**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

**STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER TO PARLIAMENT  
RESOLUTION ON THE ABORIGINAL AND  
TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE  
CANBERRA - 23 AUGUST 1988**

Madam Speaker,

I move, that this House

acknowledges that:

(1) Australia was occupied by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who had settled for thousands of years before British settlement at Sydney cove on January 26, 1788;

(2) Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders suffered dispossession and dispersal upon acquisition of their traditional lands by the British Crown; and

(3) Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were denied full citizenship rights of the Commonwealth of Australia prior to the 1967 Referendum.

and affirms:

(4) the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage; and

(5) the entitlement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to self-management and self-determination subject to the Constitution and the laws of the Commonwealth of Australia;

and considers it desirable that the Commonwealth further promote reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens providing recognition of their special place in the Commonwealth of Australia.

Madam Speaker,

Yesterday we celebrated the opening of the Parliament's new and permanent home with ceremony and dignity, in a spirit of amity and with a renewed determination to fulfil our responsibilities to serve the people of Australia.

Today the ceremonies are over and we are getting down to work.

But it is my belief that we cannot afford easily to put aside that constructive awareness of our national obligation which pervaded the opening of this building.

It is with that in mind that I am moving this resolution and seeking for it the wholehearted support of the House.

This motion is not another item of ceremony to be performed and then forgotten when we get down to the real business of politics.

This motion is our real business - the beginning of our Parliamentary duties in our new building.

In our Bicentennial year, and at the outset of our first working day in this Chamber, a motion such as this could hardly be more appropriate.

Because our new beginnings in this building allow us to focus with fresh minds on the great question - the great challenge - posed by our celebration of 200 years of European settlement: the nation's relationship with its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens.

At the start of our Bicentennial year, the Australian Heads of Churches issued a statement titled "Towards Reconciliation in Australian Society".

The idea for this resolution originated with that statement and the precise words of the resolution have been suggested by the Churches.

For this reason, and to prevent the injection of party politics into this resolution, I believe it should be voted on without amendment from either side of the House.

The motion is in three parts.

It begins by acknowledging as historical truths

- . the prior occupation and settlement of Australia by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- . the dispossession and dispersal they suffered after 1788; and
- . the denial of full citizenship rights to them until 1967.

Whatever one's political views or social theories those are undeniable facts of the Australian story.

But it is not sufficient merely to acknowledge those truths without drawing out their implications - I believe their inevitable implications.

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Accordingly this motion goes on in its second part to affirm the importance of the Aboriginal culture and the entitlement of Aboriginal people to a substantial degree of self-management.

The acknowledgement of these historical truths and the affirmation of these implications by this Parliament - and preferably a unanimous acknowledgement and affirmation - will go a long way towards their greater acceptance throughout the community.

But it would still be inadequate to leave the issue at that point.

We must add one logical step and draw one conclusion of ultimate significance.

We must, if we are truly to fulfil our responsibilities as the elected representatives of the Australian people, express our utmost determination to promote reconciliation within our community.

And we must do it today.

We must, in the words of the third part of this motion, state the desirability of the Commonwealth further promoting reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens, providing recognition of their special place in the Commonwealth of Australia.

Madam Speaker,

In the informal discussions which have taken place among members concerning this motion the view has sometimes been put that such a motion is purely symbolic and therefore of no importance or relevance to the Aboriginal and Islander people. I reject that view firmly.

For many years Governments of both political affiliations have endeavoured to provide what could be termed physical or technical solutions to the needs of the Aboriginal and Islander people.

They have provided special assistance to help them in education, housing, employment, health and other fields.

But we recognise we must do more.

For the education, housing, employment, and health standards of Aboriginal and Islander people still lag far behind those of the rest of the community.

My Government is proud of its record in continuing and improving this flow of assistance. We will continue to do so as the Budget speech of the Treasurer will clearly indicate tonight.

Yet we also recognise that the true remedy does not lie purely in the allocation of resources.

For if we provide budgetary assistance but not hope, not confidence, not effective consultation, not reconciliation, then that assistance will fail to lift Aboriginal and Islander people from their disadvantaged state.

In the past, too many of those programs of assistance have been decided on by Governments without the informed involvement of the people they were designed to assist.

Even more fundamentally, those physical remedies for the physical needs of the Aboriginal people have not been accompanied by proper recognition of their cultural tradition or of their legitimate place in Australian society.

The proposed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission will be one major step in the direction of self-determination and self-management for the Aboriginal and Islander citizens of this nation.

At the same time, the Government is committed to a real and lasting reconciliation, achieved through full consultation and honest negotiation, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal citizens of this nation.

This will be recognised by the Preamble to the Commission legislation.

It will be recognised by the compact or treaty which we are committed to negotiating with Aboriginal and Islander people.

And, Madam Speaker, it will be recognised by our support for this resolution.

Without this overall approach, without a proper settlement and proper recognition, there can be no real and lasting improvement for the Aboriginal and Islander people.

That is why this resolution is no mere symbolism or empty tokenism.

Madam Speaker,

This resolution will not be the first formal recognition of the special position of the Aboriginal and Islander people.

In 1967 the people of Australia voted overwhelmingly in a referendum initiated by the Liberal-Country Party Government to give the Commonwealth the right to make special laws for Aboriginal people. Significantly, this referendum had the support of all major political parties.

In 1975, Senator Bonner's motion on "prior ownership" was debated by the Senate. That was Parliament's first formal step in setting the record straight and in pointing the way to reconciliation. Significantly again, it had bipartisan support.

Today, Parliament must make a further statement. We must tell the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that their feelings of dispossession generated by 200 years of non-Aboriginal settlement are recognised, that their culture and heritage is valued, and that through self-management their need for a more empowered place in the nation's life is affirmed.

And more than that, this resolution will tell all Australians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that we are prepared to enter our third century of life together on this continent in a spirit of national reconciliation - not collective national guilt, not shame, but with proof of our capacity to recognise past wrongs and to build on that recognition a shared future of understanding and goodwill.

What is required by Government is the political will to follow through with these goals.

In a recent article about the proposed treaty, "Nugget" Coombs said: "It's a politician's job to recognise when the will is there to do something: but they also have a responsibility to create that will."

And on the spurious claim that such a path to reconciliation would create division in the community "Nugget" Coombs went on, "It's never divisive to correct injustice. The fact of injustice is divisive and will continue to be until we correct it and learn to live with it. People who benefit from injustice will oppose this, but you don't stop working for justice simply because people around you don't like it."

The Government is committed to correcting the injustices of the past. The political will is there, the support is there, as evidenced by this resolution from the Churches. The aim is that we will all move forward together in a happier, more just and unified society.

I commend the Australian Heads of Churches' for their initiative in suggesting this important step on the road to reconciliation and I am pleased to see them represented in this Chamber today.

Madam Speaker,

In full recognition of the significance of this moment to Parliament and, not just to Parliament, but to all Australians, I now commend this resolution to the House.

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