



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH CHERIE PRYOR, TOWNSVILLE
ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER MEDIA ASSOCIATION (TAIMA)
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PRYOR: On the 12th of June 1988 you signed a negotiative statement. Is your Government still committed to that?

PM: This is in regard to the Treaty?

PRYOR: Yes.

PM: Absolutely. I'd like to say these things about that Cherie. Firstly, as I've said, a total commitment to the concept. Some people may wonder why there's been such a long period since then with nothing concrete emerging. There's been a lot of informal discussion among the Aboriginal communities because of the raising of this issue and we are giving very careful thought to the best way in which we can ensure that the Aboriginal communities spread around Australia have the maximum opportunity of saying exactly what they want. Because I don't want on behalf of the Government to impose something. What's got to come out of this is a view from our friends in the Aboriginal community as to what they want the Treaty to say. And importantly also we've got to educate to a proper level of understanding the non-Aboriginal community. Gerry Hand wants to make sure that these processes of consultation and education are undertaken in a most effective manner. The other point I want to make is that of course Gerry's time has been very very much taken up since then with having to deal with the strong continuous opposition by our political opponents in the Parliament which has occupied just about the whole of his time. They've opposed very strongly all our Aboriginal Affairs initiatives in the Parliament, the enquiries into Aboriginal administration and we've had enormous difficulties with time and energy in getting the ATSIC legislation through. That simply has meant that Mr Hand hasn't had the time that he would've liked to have had to deal with this. But now that we're getting some of those things behind us he will be giving it the more concentrated attention that he hopes for. I hope to see some real progress on this issue during next year.

PRYOR: Aboriginal people are wary of a Treaty because any negotiations leading up to a treaty, your Government or any government, must recognise sovereignty. I'd like to quote on something that you said at the Barunga festival last year, that Aboriginal people were the prior occupiers of this land. Why hasn't your Government signed say like anything saying that?

PM: Well we have first of all the statement by the Prime Minister to that effect and the statement by the Prime Minister is significant. We also had some attempts to approach this issue in regard to the preamble of the ATSIC legislation and we're not able to achieve agreement on that which was unfortunate. Because what you've got to remember, when you're moving to a legislative position in our Parliament it's not just the House of Representatives which the Government controls but the Senate which we don't control. There we have consistent opposition to any progressive idea in regard to Aboriginal Affairs from the Opposition. So we don't control that area. But the important thing in our judgement Cherie is that we've really got to get a level of understanding in the total Australian community out of which we will get a Treaty which is meaningful and will represent a recognition by non-Aboriginal Australians of the injustices of the past. And reciprocally a recognition from the Aboriginal and Torres Island communities that that is a meaningful recognition by non-Aboriginal Australians. So from that basis that we can move to what is important and that is to implement the range of programs in the areas of education, employment, health and housing which are going to do the things which need to be done to lift the standards and quality of life of the Aboriginal community.

PRYOR: What can the Aboriginal people who live in Queensland expect from the next State election in regard to deeds of grant in trust in Aboriginal reserves?

PM: I can't speak for the State government of Queensland. All I do know is that the Aboriginal community in Queensland, as indeed the non-Aboriginal community, will get infinitely better government from the incoming Goss Labor Government than they've received in the years of darkness of conservative rule.

PRYOR: In 1968 the Australian people voted overwhelmingly in favour of the referendum giving the Federal Government power over States to legislate laws regarding Aboriginal people. As Prime Minister can you give me an example of when the Federal Government has exercised that power?

PM: Well, yes. The situation of our sacred sites legislation for instance. In that we have been prepared to be available where the States haven't exercised their power adequately. That has in fact been done and the next point of course is the fact that the Commonwealth legislation is there acts as a constraint upon States who may not wish to act in this area in a way that we think is appropriate.

PRYOR: Last question. The Australian Government is helping and supporting other third world countries. What is your Government doing in relation to helping the indigenous people of this country who are in a similar situation besides inadequate funding with Aboriginal housing, health facilities etc?

PM: The answer really comes in a number of parts. Firstly Cherie the increase in funding under this Government has been staggering. There's no area of Commonwealth expenditure which has increased so much in real terms as in the area of Aboriginal Affairs. If you just take the last two years for instance where there has been in aggregate terms a reduction in Commonwealth outlays on its total programs, a reduction in real terms, we have given prominence to Aboriginal Affairs which has meant that in the last two years in succession there's been a 16% and an 8% increase in real terms in funding. In other words we have given a special priority to the needs of that group of Australia which we recognise as the most disadvantaged. So that's the first thing - a massive increase in real terms in expenditure. But I think you appreciate, as well as we do, that it's not simply sufficient to spend more money. What we've been trying to do is initiate a range of programs which with the use of more money and the use of more understanding is going to mean that you address the real issues. There is nothing more fundamental in my judgement than the education and employment opportunities for our Aboriginal communities. And that's why we have launched a number of programs to increase the educational opportunities for Aboriginal Australians and under this Government there has been a significant increase in the participation rate by Aboriginals in both the secondary and tertiary education system. But we haven't been content just to rest on that achievement and last month John Dawkins initiated a further education program which is calculated to increase the opportunities for Aboriginals to get into and remain in the education system. Because that in the end is the basis upon which will be determined the capacity of the Aboriginal people to get fulfillment not only in employment but in other ways of participation in the total community. Of course the other thing that we've done, against a lot of opposition from our political opponents, is to press through with the ATSIC legislation. With that legislation for the first time in the whole history of this country we will have an arrangement embedded in legislation which is going to

ensure that the Aboriginal people themselves can do two things. First, have a process of communication, a formal process of communication and consultation with the Government of this country as to what their priorities are in their communities and secondly then through the ATSIC apparatus to be associated with the implementation of those programs. Never before has this happened. What has happened in the past is that successive governments in Canberra have themselves tended to determine what is good for the Aboriginal people and impose it. Our view is that that's not the right way, that we have to maximise the opportunities for consultation. And then may I say that just today I have chaired a conference in the Cabinet room here in Canberra at which there were representatives of the Aboriginal and Torres Island people and of the major business organisations and of the trade union movement together with Mick Miller and Fred Miller who have been there to - Fred Hall I mean, who's been the Chairman of the Aboriginal Action Committee. The purpose of that meeting was to commit the resources of the private sector employers and of the trade union movement to our Aboriginal Employment Action program. That really has two bases. One is to emphasise again our commitment to the educational opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Islanders. But secondly and most importantly to have the private sector employers of this country give a commitment, which they have, to facilitating the expansion of employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Islanders in the employment sector. Now if you take all those things together, importantly what that means that under this Government is that we have done more than has ever been done before to not simply spend more money, which is important, but to increase the sense of understanding within the community generally of the national obligation that exists to improve the condition and quality of life of the Aboriginal people.

PRYOR: That's all I have.

PM: Thank you very much Cherie.

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