



## PRIME MINISTER

**SPEECH NOTES BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP  
TO THE INAUGURAL MEETING: COUNCIL FOR ABORIGINAL  
RECONCILIATION, CANBERRA, 21 FEBRUARY 1992**

Mr Chairman, members of the Council - I have taken this opportunity to welcome you here for this inaugural meeting and to say one or two things which I think ought to be said.

There is a big challenge ahead of you - a challenge which has pretty well defeated us for 200 years.

But I think this is a good time to take it on. I think there is a new willingness among Australians to embrace change, and there is certainly a willingness in this government to make changes.

You'll see some of that in the economic statement next week. As long as I'm in this position you're going to see changes.

And one of the big changes I want to see is change in the status of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. At present it is awful. For many Aboriginal people it's a tragedy. It debilitates our nation - it debilitates our culture, our reputation and our self-esteem. It undermines our ambitions to be a good society.

I'm one of those people who think it can be fixed.

I think most Australians these days recognise that having come here and taken over the place from the Aboriginal - we can't now sneer at those of them who have ended up demoralised and destitute.

These days most Australians recognise that - and if they forget it from time to time, it doesn't mean that they can't easily be persuaded to the cause of improvement. That's one reason why we can make changes.

Most Australians I think also recognise the unarguable fact, the big fact - the fact that Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders were the first Australians - and that they are no less Australians for that.

That's the first building block. That's a strength. It means that if other things were equal there would be no question about the status of Aborigines. They have an

absolute status, and an absolute right to be in the mainstream, not the margins. The thing is to make the other things equal.

The government is open to suggestion about the best way to make this happen. The door's open. You're the best people to judge, and we want to hear from you.

But, let me tell you, as a politician - there are always those who are happiest spending their time arguing the toss. On these sorts of bodies you can spend your time debating fine principles and finer points. You can talk about ideal outcomes from now until the end of the century. You can spend a decade in debate and deliberation.

Or you can do something.

I suggest you aim at doing something. Something real.

Make real improvements. Concrete improvements - in health and education for instance. Building blocks of change.

I believe - in fact I'm quite certain - that the best way to improve relations between Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians and the best way to provide a basis for reconciliation is to close the gap in living conditions.

At present the gap is huge. It has to be closed - in the end it has to be diminished to the point where no one can point to someone and say the reason for that person's poverty, or illness, or alcoholism is that he or she is Aboriginal.

I think most Australians want that to happen. And I think they also recognise that it will only happen if the energy and commitment is coming from the whole community - non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal. There's no question that the Aboriginal community has got to deliver a lot of the initiative, and be active players in this.

I said before that I think there is a shift in the mood of Australia - that people are open to change. I think that's true in their attitude to your concerns.

I don't mean that they simply want to see a problem solved. They do want to see that: but I also think non-Aboriginal Australia is now much more sympathetic and much more knowledgeable.

We're generally much better educated about Aboriginal culture and history, much more aware of the civilisation which existed here before Europeans came, much more knowledgeable about what has happened since - and much more concerned about what is happening now.

It's not true of all non Aboriginal Australians of course -- there is still a certain amount of ignorance and prejudice in this country, but, like I said, there's no future in dwelling on the negatives, no point in dwelling on the people who find it harder to see. Concentrate on the ones who see best and the rest will be persuaded by the things they see you do.

So again, if you'll forgive a little political advice - that's what you've got to work on, your strengths, and the strengths which are waiting to be tapped. It's about creating and catching a wave.

For my part, I am absolutely committed to this. It's a huge challenge, and hugely significant in the determination of Australia's future.

But if we - the government, ATSIC and this council - if we set ourselves progressive goals and work towards them urgently, we can begin to destroy that gap in living standards, we can begin to make life better for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, and if we do that it will be a lot better for non-Aboriginal Australians as well.

And when people see what is being done, more and more will come to believe in what can be done - and they'll want it to be done.

Mr Chairman I have the greatest faith that you and your Council can do it. I look forward to seeing you regularly and seeing the signs of your progress. I wish you well.