



## PRIME MINISTER

ADDRESS BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP  
RECEPTION TO COMMEMORATE THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
REFERENDUM, 27 MAY 1992

Ladies and gentlemen

We are here to commemorate a highly significant event in Australia's history.

In 1967 the Commonwealth Government asked the Australian people to give it the power to legislate for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, and the Australian people resoundingly answered "Yes".

Australians do not readily give assent to referendum proposals.

Of forty two questions which have been put to referendum since Federation, only 8 have been passed.

In 1967, asked if Aborigines should at last be counted in the census, if they should be counted equally with all other Australians, and if the Australian Government should have responsibility for legislation relating to their affairs, more than 90 per cent of Australians answered "Yes".

It was an unprecedented result and one which will probably never be bettered.

It is a result well worth commemorating today.

But, as with many commemorations, our celebrations are tinged with regret.

The truth is we have not succeeded in meeting the challenge which the triumphant referendum result required us to meet.

The inequality, the injustice and the racism remain.

The memory and the consequences of injustices done in the past continue.

We cannot erase these facts - nor should we seek to.

We should remember them. All Australians should know the facts of conquest, of dispossession, of the brutal treatment and equally inhuman neglect, and they should recognise the attitudes and motives which inspired them.

As I said, we cannot erase the past but it is our long overdue duty to erase the attitudes which informed it.

If we wish to lay claim to being truly a decent, civilised advanced nation, the arrogance, intolerance, ignorance and complacency which for so long characterised the attitudes and policies of White Australia has to go.

Today I think we white Australians should consider how much it will do for our own self-esteem if we can eradicate the prejudice and injustice.

We have made some progress in the last twenty years.

Young Australians are better informed than any previous generation about the extraordinary pre-European history and culture of their country.

Through the education system, but equally through the achievements of Aboriginal artists, writers and musicians, we have learned to value the culture and history of Aboriginal Australia as never before.

We now know much more about what happened on the pastoral frontier, on the missions and reserves, and in the towns and cities of Australia.

We know about the crimes committed in the name of white supremacy, enlightenment and progress, including perhaps the most shameful of all - the removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

But I think we are also learning to recognise the contributions Aboriginal Australians have made to this country and to the contemporary Australian identity.

The Aboriginal story, including the heroes of their resistance to the European invasion, has become very much a part of the Australian story as Europeans understand it.

In the past the profound Aboriginal knowledge of this land was essential to the survival of European Australians on the frontier.

Today through their art, music and writing, they deepen our understanding of the Australian environment and point the way toward a proper relationship with it.

They deepen our understanding of what it is to be Australian.

Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders have served this nation in peace and war.

In sport and other fields they number among our legends.

In the 1990s there can be no excuse for failing to recognise either our debts or our duties to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.

In this decade all Australians should come to recognise that there is no true loyalty or affection for this country which does not include them.

In all this, it becomes very clear that those people who fought for more than a decade to see the 1967 Referendum proposed and passed were doing all Australians a great service.

Some of those people from the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders are with us tonight - and I think we should acknowledge their achievement.

The passing of the Referendum was the prerequisite of change.

It was also a necessary tool of conservation and protection.

It was the mandate to act in Aboriginal interests given the Commonwealth in 1967 which just last week made it possible to protect sacred sites near Alice Springs.

It is appropriate tonight that we acknowledge the many positive achievements since 1967.

In addition to that broader awareness of Aboriginal history and culture, there are concrete indications of change for the better.

Last year we established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

Its creation, by unanimous vote of the parliament, is itself evidence of the feeling in Australia that this must be the decade of change.

I have great faith in the Council - I think it offers us our best ever chance.

The ground for its success has been better prepared than at any time in the past.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are increasingly participating in the mainstream of society.

There are more graduates. In 1979 just 8 per cent completed secondary school - in 1991 that figure was thirty per cent.

Perhaps the most outstanding achievement is the extent to which Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have been given power to decide programs and policy directions.

Having an Aboriginal head of a statutory authority in 1967 was unthinkable - beside me tonight are two such people.

Having an organisation like ATSIC, all of whose leaders and decision makers must be by law Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders, was unthinkable.

Having Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in positions of real power was unthinkable.

Today they have such positions - it is unthinkable that they should not.

There is another development which is I think the most heartening of all.

It is that more and more Australians are identifying themselves as Aboriginal.

There is a growing pride in being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, in being descended from the first Australians - I believe that is a good sign for all of us.

It suggests the pride we will all need to have in ourselves if we are going to overcome those inequities and attitudes which shame us.

I believe that this year can be a turning point, as 1967 was.

We can change attitudes through education, through all manner of interventions and support, through our own best efforts.

But we will not change them satisfactorily and for all time until we begin to bridge the great gulf in living conditions.

In pursuing our goals we should adopt as our guiding philosophy the achievement of real and measurable results: on establishing the building blocks of change, those concrete improvements in living conditions which in the end will be the surest guarantee against prejudice and discrimination.

In 1992 you can be sure that the Australian Government does not regard these issues in the way they have so often been regarded - as marginal.

They are central. They are central to the notions of democratic justice and human progress which are at the heart of our traditions.

They are central to our identity and self-esteem.

They are central to our reputation in the world.

They are central to the debate about what kind of society we want.

It is the issues which are central now. It is the people - the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders - who must be central in the future. Central, I mean, to Australian society, the Australian nation.

And I firmly believe that if we pursue our goals with the same determination which brought about the Referendum twenty five years ago we will do that.

Thank you.