



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP

**COMMONWEALTH RESPONSE TO THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO
ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY, 24 JUNE 1992**

Mr Speaker

I seek leave to make a Parliamentary Statement on the Commonwealth's response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

Mr Speaker

On 26 February, I presented the One Nation Statement. In it, I announced measures to help close the gaps which for so long have separated Australians.

I said then that all our efforts should go towards uniting the country. I also said we should combine a more efficient economy with a fairer and more equitable society.

27 May was the 25th Anniversary of the 1967 referendum to give the Commonwealth the power to legislate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

On that occasion I said that, as a nation, we have not yet succeeded in meeting the challenge set by the triumphant referendum result.

Today, there is no more central issue to our national identity and self-esteem than the injustices brought home to us all by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

There is nothing more central to our reputation in the world.

Or to the kind of democratic, just society to which we aspire.

Mr Speaker

The needs are clear.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have about half the average yearly income of other Australians.

Participation by Aboriginal young people in post-school education is around a fifth of the rate for non-Aboriginal young people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all age groups have mortality rates almost three times higher than for the overall population.

The custody rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is 29 times that of the general community.

These few statistics give some idea of what the Royal Commission called "the disadvantaged and unequal position" of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all aspects of Australian society.

The Commonwealth sees the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody as a national opportunity for genuine change in the lives of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

On behalf of the Government, I would like to say again how much we appreciate the work of the Royal Commissioners and their staff.

Their work documented a tragic waste of life.

The Royal Commission investigated the deaths of ninety-nine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody.

But at least thirty more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody since the Royal Commission finished its investigations.

I know that nothing can remove the grief, anger and loss felt by the families, relatives and friends of those who died.

But it is fundamentally important that the Royal Commission found the real killer.

The responsibility lies in large measure with entrenched, institutionalised racism and discrimination.

Those who died were victims of over two centuries of dispossession, prejudice and neglect.

We cannot evade these harsh truths. Nor should we.

But we can work to change them.

On 31 March this year Robert Tickner, the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, tabled responses by the Commonwealth and all mainland State and Territory Governments to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

This kind of cooperation is a truly national achievement, crossing boundaries of jurisdiction and politics.

Its importance cannot be minimised.

In our response to the Royal Commission, the Commonwealth supported all but one of the Royal Commission's recommendations.

We allocated \$150 million over five years for law and justice initiatives and to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their own efforts to overcome alcohol and substance abuse.

Today I am proud to announce the second stage of the Commonwealth's response - a concerted attack on the economic and social disadvantage which is reflected nowhere more starkly than in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody.

And a renewal of our commitment to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

These measures entail an additional \$250 million over five years, taking the total Commonwealth expenditure in response to the Royal Commission, over five years, to \$400 million.

In difficult times, this level of funds is not easy to find. But the need must be faced.

Mr Speaker

The Royal Commission's report described the efforts, initiatives and dedication of Aboriginal people and communities and organisations across Australia to protect their culture, restore self-esteem and achieve real equality.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are taking control of their lives and communities.

They are demonstrating the will for renewal and for self-determination.

Today the Government reaffirms its support for these Australians.

The concepts "self-determination" and "renewal" are increasingly a reality.

The structures are there to ensure both their effect and their survival.

Elected Commissioners of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission now make national decisions in Aboriginal Affairs.

Sixty elected Regional Councils now make decisions on priorities, needs and funding for their areas.

The knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are now vital in developing and delivering important Commonwealth programs and services.

Mr Speaker

From the beginning, the ATSIC Commissioners had a major role in shaping the responses by Governments to the Royal Commission.

I would like to express the Commonwealth's gratitude to the Chairperson of ATSIC, Miss Lois O'Donoghue, and to the Commissioners for their dedication.

I would particularly like to thank the Commissioners and Regional Councils of ATSIC for their efforts over many months of consultations and negotiations to ensure the best possible responses by Governments to the Royal Commission.

The ATSIC Commissioners were closely involved in developing the measures I am announcing today and endorsed this package of measures before it was considered by Cabinet.

I would also like to recognise the energy and dedication of the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Mr Robert Tickner.

His contribution has been extraordinarily valuable and central in responding to the Royal Commission.

The initiatives I announce today constitute a renewed attack on economic and social disadvantages among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

These are initiatives with a difference - in that they are firmly based on the notions of empowerment and self-determination.

No real change is possible without the energy and will of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves.

Imposed solutions will not work.

This has been the fundamental flaw in many previous, well-intentioned policies.

We are focusing on the future - on economic development and on Aboriginal young people.

We are working for increased income in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations, thus reducing dependence.

We have balanced this strong emphasis on economic development with equally strong initiatives in social and cultural self-determination.

These initiatives will mean more jobs, enterprise opportunities and more training for Aboriginal people.

They will raise community and individual incomes.

They will improve community living standards.

They will increase community self-reliance.

They will address the needs so clearly set out in the Royal Commission's report.

Mr Speaker, I turn now to the detailed economic development aspects of this package.

\$60 million over five years will be provided for a land acquisition and development program.

It will provide the capital resources and training for better use and sustainable development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land.

\$6.6 million over the next three years will be directed to an Aboriginal Rural Resources program to encourage enterprise, particularly in managing pastoral properties.

A Community Economic Initiative Scheme, costing \$23.3 million over five years, will foster local enterprises.

The Australian National Parks and Wildlife contract employment program for managing natural and cultural resources will be expanded at a cost of \$10.6 million over five years.

ATSIC will develop long-term Aboriginal industry strategies in the pastoral, arts and tourism industries.

\$15 million over five years will be provided for these strategies, to draw together and build on existing initiatives.

The Community Development Employment Program will be expanded at a cost of \$43.9 million over five years.

This will ensure an increased emphasis on income-generation and will enable CDEP to better meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and young people.

A Young Peoples' Employment Program will be established, at a cost of \$21.9 million, to provide work placements largely within Aboriginal organisations and linked to TAFE training.

The total cost of these economic development initiatives is \$181.1 million over five years.

They will make a difference because they ARE different. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will shape and control them.

Mr Speaker, I now turn to the youth aspects of the package.

A Young Peoples' Development Program will be established, at a cost of \$23 million over five years, to encourage planned community action to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

We will set up an Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation Development Program at a cost of \$9 million over five years.

This initiative will provide Aboriginal sports development officers to work in communities.

\$20 million over five years will be provided for 200 additional Aboriginal Education Workers from 1993.

\$10 million will be provided for 600 more pre-school places for Aboriginal children from 1994.

We will also work for better Aboriginal access to pre-schools.

These measures respond directly to the strong views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that their children are their future.

All Australians can understand and share this view.

Mr Speaker

We will also provide \$6.9 million over five years for measures to improve cooperation between the Commonwealth, States and Territories and to assist them to monitor initiatives arising from the Royal Commission.

We have already announced that ATSIC will monitor progress by Governments in implementing the Royal Commission's recommendations.

These processes will be public and will continue our commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission will also report annually on the human rights situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.

The Commonwealth Government cannot, alone, eliminate the disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Aboriginal affairs is the concern of all Australians and their Governments.

For real change, Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments must work together with Aboriginal communities and organisations.

We are making progress. On May 11, Heads of Government endorsed a framework for intergovernmental cooperation in Aboriginal affairs.

The Commonwealth is working with State, Territory and Local Governments to put this cooperative framework into action.

We will develop, with the States and Territories, a National Aboriginal Policy Statement and negotiate joint responsibility agreements in specific areas.

These arrangements will take some time to put in place. However, our discussions with the States, Territories and Local Government on the response to the Royal Commission have emphasised the need for real cooperative planning and delivery.

Among the measures I have announced today, the Rural Resources, Australian National Parks and Wildlife Contract Employment, Sport and Recreation and education initiatives all involve funding or delivery through the States and Territories.

Local Government is also actively involved in the intergovernmental cooperative framework now accepted by Heads of Government.

It would confer a great advantage on our efforts if local government were to actively participate in our initiatives.

We will continue to encourage practical cooperation between Local Government and Aboriginal communities and organisations - particularly the sixty ATSIC Regional Councils across Australia.

Mr Speaker

Last year, by Act of Parliament supported by all political parties, we established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

In itself, this is evidence of the desire for justice among Australians.

I have great faith in the Council and its Chairperson, former Royal Commissioner, Mr Patrick Dodson.

I think the Council offers Australia its greatest chance of learning that there is no true loyalty or affection for this country that does not include respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Mr Speaker

These issues are central to our nation and its future. They are also urgent.

As a nation, we face the challenge of the consequences of dispossession, conquest, brutal treatment and equally inhuman neglect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - the first Australians.

As I have said more than once in recent months, in this last decade of the 20th century there is no greater goal for Australians than the delivery of long overdue justice to Aboriginal people.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody reminded us of that.

This year should be the turning point: the year when as a people we decide that if we are to be truly one nation, true to our traditions and ideals, then by the year 2000 justice will have been delivered, and the shame removed.