



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP ADDRESS AT THE LAUNCH OF THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, 20 JUNE 1994

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Well, thank you very much, Robert (Tickner), Dr Bill Jonas and David Horton, the Chair person of ATSIC, Lois O'Donoghue, and ladies and gentlemen.

Well, I am very grateful for the opportunity to launch these volumes today, to be asked to launch this massive work, six years I am told in the collation and the writing. And I know it has been very eagerly awaited. It is very comprehensive work, covering a vast canvas of infinite complexity and I think it will provide all Australians, that is Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australians alike, with an invaluable source of information and understanding. And it struck me looking through it, it will be particularly useful for young Australians, and for the teaching of Aboriginal history in Australian schools, for both teachers and pupils alike, to be able to refer to such a comprehensive work and define something useful there in such a readable, digestible way. It should play a useful role in helping future generations to comprehend the extraordinary history and culture of the oldest continuing civilisation on earth.

It wasn't so many years ago that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were specimens of great anthropological curiosity, but little more as human beings living in the modern world, they were until 1967, of course, in this country not even citizens of Australia. And that is not that long ago, that's only two years before I entered the national Parliament. This country did not recognise the descendants of the original Australians as citizens. This encyclopaedia examines that referendum. It should also be made compulsory reading for some politicians, current ones, so they can see how far they have wandered from the ideals of their predecessors. Maybe some extracts and photocopies spread around might be the order. I don't think they understand the vast majority of the Australian people gave the Commonwealth the power to make laws for indigenous Australians where they were deemed necessary.

But, it not only looks at the referendum, it looks at the struggle for recognition, and that which preceded it, the contribution that Aboriginal people have made in that field, as in so many others. It also has a lot of interesting names of Aboriginal people who have made a great contribution, and are well known to their compatriots and it gives them, I think, the recognition they deserve. And many of the references, are of course, in our epoch, in our time scale. And I was pleased to see Lois O'Donoghue mentioned there, and I read her reference, nothing in it could have said how much leadership she provided when it really mattered to one of the great leaps forward in the recognition of the rights of Aboriginal Australians and their right to land in this country.

And while the encyclopaedia refers to the native title decision of the High Court it hasn't understandably yet referred to the Act because of the cut-off point for publication, but not only the change in the statutory basis on which such claims for land can be made came from all that, what came from it was, I think, also something that needs to be put into the encyclopaedia under T, and that's the word trust. Because I think a lot of trust, something very ephemeral, difficult to get your hands on, very hard to develop, easy to destroy, but terribly important to the way in which things are done. And what happened during 1993 was the development of a lot of trust. Firstly between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves, and the fact that there was something of great moment happening, brought them together, perhaps as never before, to sit down and negotiate with the Government of Australia. As I am sure in a negotiation, never had such a discussion of such significance taken place in the past. In one of the meetings I had with Lois I stung her by saying that Aboriginal people don't know how to negotiate. And I said it because I believed it to be true, hoping that they would involve themselves in the process of negotiation, where you understand what your core interests are, and you understand what the other persons core interests are, and you try and negotiate a position that settles both. And by taking up the leadership of this issue, and providing that the Aboriginal community Lois brought together, as you know, that group of people who probably never sat down quite in the same way before and discussed something of such moment as then.

And a lot of people who are not mentioned in the encyclopaedia, but ought to be in the future, emerged in whom I have great faith about the future of Aboriginal people in this country and their leadership, Marcia Langton is one of them, she is here today. Young people, who really, really started to turn it before, with Noel Pearson another, David Ross another, and there are many, many examples. And these will have, I think, an interesting sprinkled position throughout the encyclopaedia for their contribution in ushering in a new order of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves. And we saw this repeated again just last week in our discussions on the land fund, and certainly a new order of trust between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the Government of Australia. Because I think when the Mabo battle really started to heat up Aboriginal people kept coming back to the Government, "is it still all right, are they still right". A couple of weeks later it got hotter, "still ok". "Still ok". And it went on to the point where

as the problems became more stronger we saw these things being negotiated around so we could comprehend the problems.

I am speaking, perhaps, inordinately long about this, because I think it is such an epic period between the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-aboriginal people in this country, in this very important epoch that just passed.

So, we have seen periods of change in respect of the Aboriginal community and its relationship with the nation, if you like, and the Parliament run through high and low points, and we saw periods in the last, certainly since the referendum, when a lot of hope has been dissipated, and a lot of spirit has fallen away to see it come back and flourish again. I hope we can capture some of this in the encyclopaedia in later editions as it comes along.

The important thing is in the reading of this anybody seeking out the references can start to pin point things and events and times and places of significance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, that's not in any written history because no written history ever existed. And so they're little snapshots, pieces of the matrix that can let both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal people work out what the story is. That, I think, is its great value. And it is such a quick and handy reference, but across such a very large scale. It is a mighty piece of work, and David Horton deserves the greatest congratulations for the undertaking, he has also assembled an array of excellent contributors to match that vision with Ian Howie-Willis and Dallas De Brabander featuring most prominently, but of course there are many others.

I would also like to congratulate the Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies headed by Marcia Langton and Bill Jonas for their commitment to this massive project. It is a great job of work, well done, and well undertaken, and I hope it becomes one of our long run best sellers. It is out there and people have it in our schools and at home and to make that when they have the thought, or they want to know something, that they go and they find a quick reference to it, but a comprehensive and readable one.

Congratulations to all concerned, I look forward to this huge work in its later editions for some of the matters I mention, but I think all of us stand in some awe at the amount of time and effort that has gone into this, and appreciate ever so much the great initiative and the work which everyone has undertaken in bringing it to fruition. It is with very great pleasure that I launch this important publication, these two very special volumes.

Thank you.