



PRIME MINISTER

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP DOORSTOP, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, FRIDAY, 5 AUGUST 1994

E&OE PROOF COPY

J: Prime Minister, what are your comments on Mr Downer's statements on land rights over the past twenty four hours?

PM: Well, despite all the comic fumbling, as entertaining as that has been, the harsh reality is that at the end of it, what does it mean for Aboriginal people? What he says he will do is that he will repeal a Commonwealth Native Title Act and replace it with some other act which is confected between himself and the States and in the case of the Northern Territory, that he will rewrite the Northern Territory Land Rights Act which must mean that the unfettered right of the veto which Aboriginal people now have would be taken away. That's what it means.

So, people may be amused by the fumbling and the stumbling, but the hardness underneath it is he would repeal the Commonwealth's Native Title legislation and has not resiled from that. Will replace it with something that he puts together with the States while at the same time knocking around the unfettered veto that Aboriginal people enjoy under the NT Land Rights Act. That's the hard news of it. And, of course, when he was pressed about why he had made all these policies stumbles he then said 'I was pretty tired and pretty emotional and I made a slip'. Well, when you hear me say that you can write me off. Say 'that's the end of Keating. He said all these things, just write him out of the action.' I mean, I would be ashamed to say something like that. But, the thing about Mr Downer is he doesn't express any such sense of shame about not knowing his work, but in stumbling through it, keeping the thread of the hard message in tact. And, that is, in the end there will be less rights for Aboriginal people.

J: Do you write him off now as Opposition Leader?

PM: No, no, I don't write anyone off in this game. No, no.

- J: But, can you understand that he might have been a little bit overcome being actually out there with the communities and going to a corroboree and things like that?
- PM: You either know your work and have your principles set or you don't. The fact is he went out there after having said on the week-end he would repeal the Native Title Act which provides a title to Aboriginal people who have a traditional association with the land. Now, there can be only one point in that. That is to deny them land. You see, the old Liberal refrain, they get out there talking about health and education and/or - not and/or - but, or land. And, the truth is it is health, education and land. They want to say it's health, education or land and that's where, I think, the callousness of Mr Downer's view emerges.
- J: Do you think he has learnt anything from the trip?
- PM: Well, I think, he has probably learned that you need to have a defined position about where you see the rights of indigenous Australians. How you see their role in society in this country, their role in the social compact that we have, the unwritten one we have. And, Mr Downer regresses back to those views held by the conservative rednecked part of his party.
- J: ... a complete lack of understanding?
- PM: Well, I don't think it's a lack of understanding. I think it is a callous disregard of their interests. I think he understands what it means. I mean, if you go and say to an Aboriginal person, 'you now enjoy a right under the Native Title Act which you may not in the future enjoy when we repeal it or you have a right of say over development on your land in the Northern Territory which we will take away.' I mean, he understands that.
- J: Mr Keating, have you actually visited the Aboriginal communities yourself?
- PM: I have visited Aboriginal communities over the years in various parts of coastal New South Wales and western New South Wales, but more than that I put my money where my heart is in the years I was Treasurer and Prime Minister. Last, of course, with the response to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission where we made an enormous further contribution to funding for Aboriginal people. Now, that's what it is about. I mean, it is about knowing where your values are and where your principles are and putting them into effect.
- J: Prime Minister, Justice French's remarks suggest a prima-facie case that the Mabo law, the Native Title Act is somewhat flawed.

PM: No, look, if you look through the property law of Australia - get the property law of Victoria out or of New South Wales - it will be a massive set of volumes. Writing a large piece of property and cultural law from a clean sheet of paper, which is what we did with Mabo, was an enormous undertaking. Like any major piece of law it will change over time and need to be fine tuned, but the principles won't change and the Government won't entertain changing the principles. So, for those who are working in the system, working with it, we'll listen to what they have to say, but I'm sure nobody working in it will want to change its principles. And, were anyone working in it recommend to the Government that it's principles should be changed well, of course, the Government would resist such a change. Thank you.

ends