



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
DOORSTOP, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA, 30 AUGUST 1994**

E&OE PROOF COPY

PM: Less than an hour ago in one of the most cynical and provocative speeches I have ever heard delivered in Parliament the Leader of the Opposition, who has opposed the Native Title legislation and who said in Western Australia he would repeal it and who has opposed the Land Fund Bill has, in a speech attacking the Government and its motives, said that unless the Government fundamentally restructures the Land Fund Bill to give priority to health and housing only on that basis and subject to amendments by the Opposition would they support the Land Fund legislation.

So, the Leader of the Opposition has attempted to fool the country by saying in the wake of Dr Hewson's dismissal, he is embracing a softer line on Aboriginal affairs and the Land Fund. In fact, he has done no such thing. He is putting up a set of sham amendments, weasel words from which he will then say if the Government doesn't accept the amendments he will vote against the Bill. Because fundamental to his objection is the same fundamental objection the Liberal Party has had all along to this, they don't want Aboriginal and Islander people to have access to land. They'll talk about anything but land and in the speech he implied that land was an issue, but not a fundamental one.

So, three weeks ago the Leader of the Opposition said 'if necessary we would overturn the legislation.' His Deputy said on the Sunday program two weeks ago 'well, there would then be the opportunity for the States if they so wished to set up their own mechanisms for dealing with it'. The States who are managing land in all other areas as well and many of whom have been managing land in this area in the past to put in place their own mechanisms. And, when asked 'so you would happily abrogate your responsibility and give it back to the states' he said 'well, when you say abrogate, the responsibility traditionally has been there for the States all along and the question is for land management yes, for land management.

So, we have got the Leader of the Opposition three weeks ago, the Deputy Leader a week ago saying that they would overturn the Native Title legislation and give this right back to the States and now the second arm of the Government's land measures - that is, giving Aboriginal people who can't avail themselves of the benefit of the Native Title legislation by cause of dispossession can now, through this fund buy land - this is a complete anathema to the Liberal Party.

Mr Downer would have been better coming and saying "I am opposing this Bill." "I don't believe that we should have a fund of over \$1 billion being dedicated to Aboriginal people for the purchase of land." What he has done - and how Ms Gallus can support his actions I cannot understand - what he is saying is, here is some sham amendments about health and education and unless you basically completely change this Bill so it essentially has a welfare orientation rather than a land orientation, we will oppose it.

J: Have you seen the amendments, Prime Minister?

PM: No, I haven't, but he ...

J: But how do you know they are a sham?

PM: What he said was, I'm actually quoting him he said 'subject to our amendments.'

J: But how do you know they are shams if you haven't seen them?

PM: Well, because they are about functional spending on health and education.

J: Wouldn't it have made more sense to have seen them before you came out and condemned them?

PM: No, no it would not. I mean, this is a Bill about land. This is a Bill about land acquisition. This is a Bill about the central measure in justice for Aboriginal people, access to land. Now, the Native Title legislation provides land to Aboriginal people if they have a traditional connection with it. But, if they have lost the traditional connection they can only get it by acquisition. These are the two prongs of the Mabo legislation. That is, the Native Title Act and the Land Fund and to try to cynically tear up the Land Fund by saying 'oh, it should be spent functionally on health and education and subject to the Government accepting our amendments we will oppose it' is high cynicism from somebody who never supported the principle in the first place.

J: That's the end of the matter, you haven't looked at the amendments, but you are going to reject them?

- PM: No, I made it clear it in my Second Reading speech that the Government would consider the amendments, but I said that the only test of the Opposition's veracity is whether they will vote for the Second Reading speech in the House of Representatives and in the Senate.
- J: Are you saying that there is no place for any money in the Land Fund to go to health or education?
- PM: No, because the Land Fund ... we've now made very large functional appropriations to health and education and I might say the Opposition opposed these, they wanted cut backs in health and education spending in their Fightback proposals - that's health, education for Aboriginals in their Fightback proposals. The way to address these issues is through functional appropriations and functional management. This is about land and it is land which is central to Aboriginal dispossession and Aboriginal culture.
- J: What do you say to the general proposition that Government is placing more emphasis on land than on issues of health education and ...
- PM: Well, I'd just say that is nonsense. I mean, when has the Commonwealth Parliament placed this sort of emphasis on land? Never. This is the first time. I mean, this is a good thing that is being done.
- J: But it could be ... (inaudible) ...
- PM: This is a good thing that's being done and the Government will not have some Opposition Leader with tawdry motives seeking to do it in.
- J: But Prime Minister, given that the Government broke Graham Richardson's promises on Aboriginal health and made a liar out of him, haven't you left yourself open to this sort of attack?
- PM: He never made promises which were ... Graham Richardson never made specific commitments and the nature of the commitments he did make, they have been honoured. You remember there has been the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commission response, there has been the Budget funding, the Government has and I have some figures here committed between 1989-90 and 1993-94 \$1 billion. Between 1994-95 and 1998-99 we will spend a further \$1.5 billion on health for Aboriginal people. Now, look, in the professionalism of public life and in Canberra, if the Opposition believe that more money should be spent on health that's something they can argue in the Parliament, that's something the Government can reasonably consider, but to try and strike down the one bit of decent law that has come the way of the Aboriginal people in this country for land is a dreadful thing to do.

- J: You're saying that this is a good thing that the Parliament is doing, wouldn't it be even better if it were achieved in a bipartisan manner, wouldn't it be even more powerful and isn't it your responsibility as Prime Minister to try and achieve that end?
- PM: Well, I offered that bipartisanship to Dr Hewson. He came in and said on the Third Reading of the Native Title Bill, 'it was a day of shame'. I offered the same thing in my Second Reading speech which was not a political speech, I mean not a political speech, in today's House to be met with what? You know, essentially a provocative political speech which said now if you don't cop the amendments subject to our changes they are the terms on which we will pass it.
- J: Are you ultimately confident of the support of minor parties in the Senate or do you think we'll see another repeat of last year?
- PM: Well, I'm confident that a Bill of this merit will pass. I mean, this has been debated with the Aboriginal community and Islander community in this country and with other groups. I mean, there has been a long process of negotiation here which went back to the original Native Title negotiations. But, I mean, go back to what Mr Downer said in Perth. He made it clear he may repeal it if necessary. Mr Costello has confirmed that, saying that they regard land management as a matter for the States. But, they overlook the fact that in 1967 the nation gave the Commonwealth Parliament power to legislate in respect of Aboriginal and Islander people and it is under that power, and facing a High Court decision, that the Commonwealth did legislate with the Native Title Bill. Now, I can only say this to you, let me repeat here what I said in the House, the Government will consider the Opposition's amendments. There may be some elements of them that we can accept, but there is only one test about this - whether the Opposition vote for the Bill at the Second reading.
- J: Wouldn't that put the acid right back on, if as it turns out they are somewhat more benign than you fear?
- PM: Well, the Leader of the Opposition ... I've made a Second Reading speech and so has he. He has said subject to our amendments. They were his words. The Land Fund needs to be restructured to give priority to health and education. In other words, restructured not to give priority to land.
- J: Given the Opposition's concern about health and housing, do you now expect their support of the social justice package next year?
- PM: Well, I don't know what to expect from them. I mean, let me repeat a point I made to you earlier. It would have been better for Alexander Downer, at least people would say 'well, he has a view and he is standing by it, he doesn't believe there should be wholesale acquisition of land by Aboriginal people and he is opposed to it'.

Instead of that he gives the press this story they are going to be softer on the Land Fund and that gets written all over the place and this is basically to pull over moderates in the wake of Dr Hewson's dismissal. And, what do we find in the end? It is really just a device to knock the Bill over.

ends