



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
PRESENTATION OF "WALKING TOGETHER: THE FIRST STEPS",
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, 17 NOVEMBER 1994**

E&OE PROOF COPY

Sir Ronald, Pat Dodson, Mr Speaker, Mr President, my colleague the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the Australian Democrats Senator Kernot and Ms Lois O'Donoghue the Chairperson of ATSIC, Ministerial and Parliamentary colleagues, members of the Council most particularly and ladies and gentlemen.

I am very pleased to be here today for the presentation of the report "Walking Together - The First Steps" which describes Australia's progress towards reconciliation after the first three years of effort by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

I think the fact that has been remarked already by the President, the Speaker and Pat Dodson, that this Council was met with the approval of both houses of Parliament, of the parties in the Parliament. The Council is a broad representation of community and political interests and, of course, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests and it is a fine thing that we are so certain of the process that the Chairperson of it - Patrick Dodson, can actually present with some pride the report to the Speaker and to the President.

It wasn't that many years ago when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had lost heart in any process of reconciliation. It wasn't that long ago when the whole notion about land rights had fizzled out to nothing in some of the places where people were still living a traditional life, in some of the large states. And, there was a feeling of despair, I suppose, about the process, but I think, that that has changed and that is the great thing. Because, something token, a token process of reconciliation is worse than no process at all because it makes a mockery of something intrinsically important.

But, I think, we all think now that there is nothing token about this and, I think, that it is probably true that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community feel better about themselves today than a few years ago and the

Australian community feels better about reconciliation than it did just a short time ago.

I think wherever principal strikes out, wherever a truth is spoken is like rain falling on the ground - things grow, good things happen - and, I think, that non-Aboriginal Australians have recognised the truth of what has happened to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in this country. They recognise the deprivation and the crimes and the rest and that has been said and, I think, the High Court's decision in respect of Mabo - righting a wrong, putting clear a truth - that this was not a continent of no one, that there was a civilisation of people here, that there was an expropriation of their property and their rights and that later, much later indeed, the High Court recognised that Aboriginal custom and tradition would be a source of Australian common law. Now this is a significant breakthrough, but of course, as we all in this room know, that decision had legal power, but no facilitation and even in parts of it - where it was clear, or unclear where the power of it was - there was an obligation on the Parliament to legislate and say where it was and how it might be exercised. That has happened with the Native Title legislation.

I think this community of ours feels much better about reconciliation because of the passage of that Bill. I think they think that a wrong has been set right and though there has been disagreement in a political sense about it, in the end fundamentals invariably triumph and truth prospers and I have got no doubt that our community today is more at one with itself than it has ever been - not totally at one, otherwise I'm sure Pat and the Council would believe their work was finished and they couldn't possibly believe that. And, we will have much to do in developing that reconciliation further, but now there is that force to it. It is not just a Council meeting in the, sort of, amorphous problems of Australia and trying to reconcile the interests and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with those of non-Aboriginal Australians.

Land, of course, has always been central to an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. The Native Title Act is about land, the Land Fund Bill we are currently debating is about land for those who have long ago lost a traditional association with the land, but shouldn't be denied the right to acquire it or to live with it. So, that has got to be put right and over time there will be in these fundamental things a basis of reconciliation which we can then draw down for broader community support. I particularly noticed the report of the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee in August which found that reconciliation is central to Australia's aspirations as we approach the next century - I think, a wise observation - Premiers, Chief Ministers, Opposition Leaders, RSLs, CWAs, youth councils, womens electoral lobbies, local government, religious leaders, unions and business organisations all nominated reconciliation as a major goal. This is a gigantic step forward. This wouldn't have been so not so long ago.

As you know, I have just come back from a meeting of the Leaders of the Asia-Pacific area who have done an important thing in deciding to bring the Americas into a linkage with Asia so that we have an Asia-Pacific community

and that we don't see the world break up into three trading blocs - in Europe, in the Americas and in Asia. We have had this debate all my political life, anyway, about the north south dialogue and for the first time one can see a real and tangible expression when a group sits down as this group did this week to see the big powerful economies of the United States and Japan dealing with and comprehending the problems and making arrangements to deal with them with developing countries like Indonesia and China and Papua New Guinea and some others.

You get the feeling that there is something good happening in the world, that the Cold War which left these tremendous polarities and tensions, where countries were bound up by this strategic tension, that having gone what has blossomed is that which was most unlikely because this body - APEC - just never had to happen. There was no logical reason why it happened, there may be some logics in it, but it did happen and it has happened out of good will and co-operation. We can only play a part in it if we go to the world as one nation, as a nation united and not a nation in any way divided. That is why Australians need to be clear about their identity and proud of it. But, that identity must include the identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. That is why you can't go hobbling to the world saying, "please put us in the big race, but by the way, our indigenes don't have a real part of it and by the way, we are still borrowing the monarchy of another country."

So, feeling good about yourself doesn't happen unless it is genuine. It can only be genuine if there is, I think, a goodness of spirit and something where things are done, things are given, concessions are made and these, I think, we are seeking to do with the Native Title Act and with the Land Fund and other things, but more obviously, perhaps, by giving of ourselves, each of us, towards something better.

So, that is what it must mean - reconciliation - it must mean that we reject the notions that there is some sort of preordained right to the benefits of this country to non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, that we have really got to basically do it together and in the doing of it, that the metamorphosis will mean we are a different country than the one we have always been. No longer a mono culture and particularly with our multicultural community and reconciliation with our older community we then, I think, do go as one.

That means, I think, that the work can go on. Because there have been times during the Council's life where we wondered whether work would go on, whether it wouldn't peter out, just another attempt, add good will, basically drying up in the face of intransigence and bias and prejudice. Well, I think, there is enough around now and the fact that we can, in all honesty, receive this Report with what it means, and have the President and the Speaker accept it on behalf of the Parliament and the nation is a logical interim step, a report on the progress of reconciliation.

So, to all those people who have been involved - the community organisations, the industrial companies, the mining companies, the

pastoralists, the Land Councils, the Aboriginal and Islander communities and those who have served on the Council - might I add a congratulations and the very best of good wishes for the future of the council and its important work. Thank you.