



PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP
ADDRESS TO HOPE VALE COMMUNITY, QUEENSLAND
24 FEBRUARY 1995**

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Thank you members of the Hope Vale Council, other distinguished members of communities in the Cape, my colleague Peter Dodd and - mostly of course - members of the Hope Vale Community, men and women, and boys and girls.

It's a great pleasure for me to come to Hope Vale - I'm very much in your debt for opening up your community and your hearts to me and my colleagues, to get to know you, and to get to understand you, and to see how you are living here, and what your aspirations for yourselves and your community are. This is a valuable thing, and one which I have taken an opportunity...which I have taken on earnestly. Notionally, I came to lend support to the Cape York Health Council. For all the reasons that Noel (Pearson) just said, that to make a health strategy work - or any strategy work - it can't be just the leadership or the Government - it has to be everybody. And just as we are speaking about health, the non-Aboriginal community has seen a dramatic change. For instance - in the incidence of heart attacks in the last 20 years. That change didn't come simply because there were more doctors in each suburb, or that people were more likely to go them, it came because of a change in the way Australians have responded to their health needs as a community. They have changed their diet, they have changed their exercise, they have changed their levels of stress, and they have sought to live longer. So they have been given leadership by the medical community, but they have followed it through as the broader community.

This is the central point that Noel made to you, and the point that I would endorse - that whatever we do in Aboriginal Australia, has to be done between the Government, the Australian community, and you as a community. In other words, it will never be done simply by one group only - it will always be a group effort. It is about - basically - cooperation and organisation, as Gerhardt (Pearson) made the point. And it is about all of you being a part of it.

Now, great changes have been made. In 1967, Aboriginal people didn't have the right to vote in this country - they were not recognised in the Constitution. That changed. There was an enhanced consciousness about that. There has been progress since - more recently, you have seen the Commonwealth Parliament enact the Mabo legislation, coming from an important decision that said that your customs and tradition were not just something that the Australian community had to assimilate and accommodate, but that it was actually a source of the Common Law. That your traditions and customs were a source of Australian Common Law. That was a declaration, but for it to be law, the Government had to make a law. And we passed that law with the help of a lot of you a year ago with Mabo. We are now trying to...this week I will introduce the Bill for the Aboriginal Land Fund, that gives you the chance to buy land that formerly has been alienated from you, and that you can't secure under Mabo. Now why are we doing these things? Simply because we feel that a wrong has been done - yes, we do. There was the historic denunciation of your rights, the removal of your land, the attack upon your population - this community is seeking to right those wrongs, and we are seeking to right them in land. Land we know is important to you, because it is a part of the course of empowerment of Aboriginal people. That because of this spiritual connection you have with your lives and the land, the land is important to you. For us to make a reconciliation with you, the land must be part of the parcel - it must be part of the package.

But part of that is also about giving you the right to live a traditional lifestyle. That is, having the capacity to use that land. And as Noel said eloquently, "living long enough to use it as well" That is, not just having it - but living on it, enjoying it, and living long lives. Now this is what I think most Australians wish for you as a Community - that these things are possible. And I think that while it is entirely true that the Mission stations have now become Aboriginal Communities - and they do have their leaders, and you do have your strategies, and you are getting your land - we know that whenever Aboriginal people move towards a traditional lifestyle, their connection with the land not only empowers them, but changes their psychology, and it also changes the quality of their life. It changes their health, and it means that their health improves, their well-being improves - their sense of well-being - their sense of mind, and so the out-station movement is an important movement in the return to that traditional style of life which the land gives you the capacity to create.

So, can I say that as Prime Minister, I see the whole story of Aboriginal Australia - and the reconciliation - as being in a number of parts. The recognition, the vote, the land, the health, the leadership, the empowerment, the enjoyment - the happiness. Because the whole point of public policy is human happiness, and what greater objective could we have for you that you are happy and well?

Now, health is a problem. It is a problem because of congregation in part, it is a problem because of inadequacy of resources, and we know crowded accommodation in communities, former mission stations - areas - produces all sorts of health problems. And we have not seen the public facilities there in the environmental health: like the roads, the sewerage systems, the hospitals, the immunisations, the various things that the non-Aboriginal community has.

But we are also seeing a less than complete understanding on the part of Aboriginal communities about the way they live their own lives - about their diet, about how they actually...about their hygiene, about how they actually diminish the incidence of infection, about prevention once infection comes along.

None of this, of course, can be separated from education, and one of the things I was delighted about today was to see in this school - which has produced now so many quite famous people, and articulate people, leaders indeed of the Australian community - to see so many young Aboriginal Australians learning those skills: literacy, numeracy and empowerment. It is that education which is going to underpin any community understanding and strategy about how Aboriginal people join with the Government of the Commonwealth and the Government of the States and Local Government in improving their health and life opportunities. So, I come here to Hope Vale...first of all I come to a community which is welcoming, I come to one which is open, I come to one which has a sense of enjoyment and pleasure in its own company, and I come to one that is trying to grapple with its change of its history, and its' opportunities, and to do something about the problems of health. And I have been told about the problems - that you can't get the Flying Doctor in if the airport is bad. That there is no point in trying to protect yourselves from things like scabies, or from diseases of the kidneys, or nephritis, if in fact there is a run-over of sewerage. So the sewerage system has to work - it has to be adequate. It's not good for Aboriginal women to be leaving their communities to have their children - none of our women do that. Why should you? Because you have the nurturing and you have the support that you need - but you don't have the midwives, you don't have the facilities, and you don't have the doctors when you need them, because you don't have the facilities to get the doctors here, and they won't work here. All this implies to me that there is a reasonably comprehensive strategy to take this on.

First of all, a recognition of the problem. This is what the Cape York Health Council is doing - it is recognising the problem. It knows that the solution is in all of you adopting it. It knows that the solution is in better coordination with the Commonwealth, and the States and Local Governments. And it is not a matter, as I think Gerhard ~~is~~, whether it is ATSI or the Commonwealth Health Department, or the Queensland or it's the Local Government or the Health Council, or the Land Council - it is a case of everybody coming together in the delivery of a coordinated strategy. That is what we are seeking to do here.

But we can't do it without you. None of us can do it without you. If you are not interested in health in a primary way - and when I say primary, I mean in terms of your own personal health to the point where you are part of a strategy, just as any community works to alleviate disease or the likelihood of certain complaints - we can perhaps help you if you help yourselves, in joining in a strategy that actually tries to make it work. And so that health and hygiene, and that the strategy is to - if you like - ease the congregational pressures on communities by moving from towns to out-stations, or taking positions on the periphery of Aboriginal communities - all these things which lower the temperature of infection and disease and maladies - are the things which are

going to make the difference. It is not going to be simply an immunisation program. It is not simply going to be lights on the runway. It is not simply going to be the mid-wife. It is going to be the whole combination of things.

So, I think this is a period of great opportunity for all Australians, because I have said - and I mean it - that when we are as a nation together, we are stronger. When Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal Australians are together as a nation, we are stronger. And there is no doubt that the passage of Mabo has made the Australian community feel better about the Aboriginal Communities futures, and better about themselves as a community for making this opportunity and this gesture in land. We have now got to do another thing - another perhaps more complex thing. And that is, to weave into our health strategy the life and lifestyles of Aboriginal people, and to join with the administrators of the Commonwealth and the States in seeing those strategies come to pass. It is not simply a matter of money - if the Commonwealth Government wrote a cheque tomorrow morning in the Budget, it will not solve the problem. It may help in particular ways, but it will not solve the problem. So I think one of the lessons I would learn from this very welcoming visit to Hope Vale is that you understand - here in Cape York - the problem. You know it is a sophisticated problem which means all of you - every one of you - have to be part of the solution. That your leaders can articulate it, but you have to be part of the solution. So then have to develop those strategies out for housing, for health provision, for access and transiting, for medical support - but we have to be aware of all of the dangers and incidents of the traffic of disease, and to do the things which are customary in developed societies to deal with scabies - with ointments. To deal with nephritis. And to do these things which can be done, and which should be done.

So, I am delighted by the sense of community I have found here - I am heartened, buoyed - by the sense of community that I found here, by the vigour and the intelligence and the verve of your young people which I could see today in school, by the dedication of those who teach them, and inculcate these truths and this learning to them, who can provide this future on-going understanding and leadership to the community. And in seeing that, knowing that all of you want to live, and want to recapture that traditional lifestyle, that was denied to you for such a large part of our history. I think this is now a possibility - not everybody will take it, not everybody should. But those who do, will have the benefit of it both spiritually and environmentally, and in terms of their health and longevity, the challenge therefore is to deal with the communities. So, I would like to take this opportunity of saluting what has been done in recognition of this problem with the Cape York Health Council, of all the Communities of the Cape, and to say that the Commonwealth Government will be cooperating in seeking to find the right course and strategy to get the problem solved.

Some of them are location specific - and they can be done. And you have got to wonder why they haven't been done - whether it is the road through from here that should have been tarred. I mean dust is a problem - dust is a problem for respiratory complaints, of which Aboriginal people have many. Access through strips and things like that - through airports - these are simply a matter of funds and the doing of it.

These things can be done - but what has to be done is to put the strategy together, and not be territorial about it. So for my part, I said in Redfern in 1992, we - this community of Australia - want a new relationship with the Aboriginal Community. We understand the history, we understand the sins, and we want to make reparations, and we want a reconciliation. Of these we have now sought step-by-step to do. Mabo, the Land Fund, now health. And with health will be the environmental issues - housing, sewerage etc. We should be able to do it together, but together is the only way to do it. And I think that is the message of this visit. Thank you very much for having me, and for the welcome.

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