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PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP
SPEECH AT PRESENTATION OF A REPORT TO THE GOVERNMENT ON
NATIVE TITLE SOCIAL JUSTICE MEASURES 'RECOGNITION, RIGHTS
AND REFORM"', MURAL HALL, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, 27 MARCH 1995**

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One of the things that very greatly pleases me about receiving this is not so much for every detail that is written here, but for the fact that we are seeing the public manifestation of the esteem that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people hold for themselves, have always held for themselves, but which in other times when that sense of justice and sense of decency in the country has not focussed on their concerns such a report like this would never have appeared.

It is a great pleasure to me that Lois O'Donoghue is presenting it to me as head of the government because in this modern world today and as in any complex society, leadership is always everything and in the complex discussion over the High Court decision, it was Lois O'Donoghue who showed that leadership in pulling together that group of people who negotiated with the Government. I remember saying to her in one of these early meetings that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community must learn to negotiate. In saying that I was saying they must regard themselves as a force of such power that they are capable of negotiating and understanding what negotiation means. It means understanding what your core interests are and what is not in your core interest and that which you can see in the other persons point of view and trade away to come to a negotiated settlement or arrangement which reflects the broad interests and doesn't compromise the specific interest.

That leadership has, I think, been reflected in the peak Aboriginal and Islander bodies and as a consequence we, together, wrote a very effective Bill with Native Title. It was a great victory for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and for social democracy in this country when the High Court held its validity - seven judges to nothing - a couple of weeks ago. And then on its heels, of course, we bailed up the Opposition with their manipulative approach in the Senate to try to destroy the integrity of the Land Fund Bill and despite the Leader of the Opposition's cockiness when faced with the

prospect of an early poll he caved in and passed it. So, we got the double of the century in a week. Seven to zero on native title and the Land Fund Bill.

These are things which, I think, have made a great difference to the ambient climate out there in the community. I said here a week ago when Pat Dodson was presenting the Report of the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council that I think Mabo and the land fund, that the passage of Mabo has made Australians feel good about themselves. They know a right thing has been done. A just thing has been done and it has reduced racism. It has reduced racism. I think now that the wind behind the sails of the reconciliation council is part of that wind and it is the old thing: one good act begets, one good influence begets another. And, we are seeing with now a lot of horse power and much pride the presentation of that Report and similarly here today with this Report - 'Recognition, Rights and Reforms - A Report to the Government on Native Title Social Justice Measures'.

These were proposed when it was agreed amongst us, the Government and those Aboriginal people who we were negotiating with over Mabo, to say 'well look, these things shouldn't come down from on high, they shouldn't simply come from a group of representatives, but rather come from a broad basis of consultation.' I think ATSIC and the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council have gone out and done those things and ATSIC has certainly done it here by consulting with Aboriginal people around the country. The result is this and I promise you this Lois that the Government will consider it, we will look through it, we will follow the threads of the policy we have been following which says that Australia will never be one nation while ever the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are one apart from the rest of us.

That is our policy and the things that fall within that, that we can get support for and that we can do we will do. If there is more in this than we can digest we will certainly be digesting that which we can and every bit will make progress along the way.

Now, Lois said something important which shouldn't go above peoples heads and, I think, in a sense I tried to repeat that a week ago, the same thought. That is, what we are talking about here, about support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is rights not welfare and this is about rights. Social justice is about rights as well as it is about specific things. We are now talking about these intractable problems of health and housing and what we need is specific effective action. A week or so ago with Pat Dodson here I talked about some of the things we could do to be effective and when we get progress we get the snow ball affect. Just as we did with Mabo, we will get it with the other things and we do, as you say Lois, need to bring the States in and we need to bring local government in because the Commonwealth, through ATSIC, can't solve all the problems of the environmental situation with Aboriginal communities or environmental health, we can do things about direct health. I think the main thing is to get the generation of Aboriginal people out of the mind set. That some how it's welfare: it is a right, but we need to do it effectively and we need to do it together.

One of the lessons that came to me from the Cape York Health Council and my visit to Hopevale was that there, the community on the Cape, have regarded a commitment repairing the problem of health as needing a commitment by them to participate in the policies. Not just something that comes from outside, but something they are part of and without them being part of it, just the same with the non-Aboriginal community in this country, there is no way that their health can be attended to unless they are part of the solution and I think they need to be there as well.

So, I want to guarantee that the next generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not victims and are not treated as victims, that rather they are there to see this change, this shift in moral and to see that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people assert their culture and their rights and their standings and determine not to be victims and to get out there and play a role in this community. I think that is happening and this is what this is about.

I noticed in today's press, of course, with the by-election result in the ACT and elsewhere we have got all the pundits giving us the value of their views. One of the views I notice from one of them today is that Mabo and Aboriginal rights is a distraction. The republic is a distraction. Our identity is a distraction. It is really down to the grind stone in the mortgage and nothing else. Well, the person who wrote this, just as an example, I said to this person after the 1993 election 'how did you get it so wrong, how couldn't you pick the trends?' And the result was 'oh, that is what Hoggie told us. That's what Hoggie said to us.' Not that we are paid to think and to absorb the culture and to write, but no, like Mr Midnight, that is what Hoggie dropped in their ears. That Labor had no chance of winning and that the pundits should be clever and write us off.

Now, one of them is today saying 'look, the Prime Minister's obsessions with the interests of Aboriginal and Islander people is a distraction'. They couldn't be more wrong, couldn't be further from the truth. That couldn't be further from the truth than that view because unless Australia understands that it succeeds as a society - that is its economy and its community go together as a society - unless all that happens together then there is little prospect of us reaping the economic rewards that bind all this together and getting those social commitments we need, whether it be from the broad workforce or from the Aboriginal community or where ever.

So, let's say this. Three years ago, I think I am probably right in saying this Lois, we wouldn't have seen this Report. While the esteem was there always with the indigenous community about themselves and their indignation was there we wouldn't have seen this Report. It has come because the community has basically decided that these wrongs are going to be set right and these historic wrongs are going to be set right, to the extent that we can ever set them right, but at least acknowledge that the wrongs have taken place and seek to set them right. And, to follow the land change through which is, as you say, central to the future of indigenous people, with this Report which goes beyond that to look at a broader articulation of rights. I

think that is what this means. That is what the Report which Pat Dodson presented to the Government means. It is what I think the Australian community means and it does feel better about itself and it does meet the notion of multi-culturalism in its broader sense have more meaning when the nation, as a society, decides that our indigenes will be taken to its heart forever. That is what the Report means and that is why I am so delighted to receive it.

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