



# PRIME MINISTER

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP  
ADDRESS IN ANZAC PARK, THURSDAY ISLAND, 12 SEPTEMBER 1995**

## **E&OE PROOF COPY**

Mr Getano Lui (Chairperson, Torres Strait Regional Authority), Mayor (Mr Pedro Stephen), Elders, my friend Mr Ettie Pau (Torres Strait Ex Servicemen's Association) who presented a wreath with me, my colleague Peter Dodd, distinguished members of the community, ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls.

Thank you very much for that wonderful warm welcome this afternoon. I have always wanted to come to the Torres Strait. I am most happy to be able to have come as Prime Minister and to come to this beautiful part of Australia.

I have been very moved by the speeches, the things that have been said by your Mayor, by Miss Bakoi Bon (high school captain), by Mr Waraka Adidi (ex serviceman), by Mr George Mye (Chairman of Damley Island) and they all say one thing, I think, and one thing that I certainly agree with and that is to say that we are all part of this great country - Australia. We are all Australians, we are Australians together. We will be Australians forever. And, that this great multicultural country of ours is different in parts. We do have our separate, if you like, ancestral backgrounds, but we have this commitment to this great country and this great continent, held in trust for most of us by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country. It is now our bounty to enjoy thanks to this wonderful bequest which you as indigenes of this country have given us.

I am pleased to be here today. I am pleased to be here with my daughters, so they can see this part of Australia too and know that the land they grow up in is one of tolerance, one of equity and one of decency and one of pleasure and one of friendship and one were the environment matters to us all. The place we can all enjoy together.

I was particularly drawn by the references to Eddie Mabo. This is, I think, the right place to say that a good thing was done a couple of years ago. A truth recognised, a lie overturned when the High Court said that the common law of this country doesn't simply come from the tradition and customs of people of European decent. It doesn't simply come from the British common law. Now it

is said by our highest court that Australia's common law comes from the traditions and customs of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. So, it means that your customs and your traditions are as much a part of my common law as they are of your common law. That is, in no stronger way could it be said we are together and we are one than to say that our customs and traditions and our cultures and beliefs form part of our common heritage in our common law. From that law, of course, has sprung an indigenous title which means you, as a people, are entitled to certain lands that have traditionally been yours. This is a far greater right to come from the recognition of your culture than to be given by some statute or act of Parliament or act of grace or act of giving by a legislator because now it is yours as an inherent right and perhaps it is late, but better late than never that we have drawn a line in the sand and said that the lands which you make your traditional connection with, that are not alienated are yours and we have set up the processes for it.

The contemporary word was by the High Court, but the contemporary act was by the Commonwealth Parliament in the Native Title Act and it all started here in the Torres Strait Island. That is, in recognition of the justice which Eddie Mabo sought, in seeking it and finding it, he has changed all of our lives and all of your lives especially.

So, this is, I think, a good thing to ponder. We have got great ground to make up and there are great social issues that we have to address, but we could never address those, no act of giving from the Parliament or the Government, no matter how generous can be as complete or as valuable as the recognition of our essence as Australians our custom and tradition and law comes as much from your traditions as it comes from non-indigenous, non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island culture.

This is, in a sense, starting the slate again and the things we want to draw on it are the things we must do together. I think it does underwrite the fact that we are all members of the one country and that we are Australians and you are as important to this Parliament of ours as the people from the regions of Sydney - as I am from - or those other great parts of Australia, that we are all Australians - one - and we are together. The proof of that is, in fact, the very sacrifices which we have seen commemorated here today. In the Second World War where Torres Strait Islanders fought in defence of Australia, fought in defence of themselves and the rest of us, for the democratic values and the culture and the tolerance we know our country has, but we knew that the aggressor would deny us. Today, I give thanks on the part of all Australians for that sacrifice, for those who suffered and for those who died and I want that known and understood by all Australians.

Could I say that in speaking about your culture and your rights, George Mye made reference to the fact that with ATSIC your fear is that the Islander culture may be subsumed in the greater culture of Aboriginal Australia. This has always been a risk, but one always believes that again in tolerance and fairness, this will not be so. But, you are suggesting to us that there be a Torres Strait Islander Commission. That you receive the funding from the Commonwealth Parliament and not ATSIC and that you decide how this might

be spent in the best interests of Torres Strait Islander people. Let me tell you this is something the Commonwealth Government is prepared to consider. This is something we are prepared to think about. This, of course, will need discussions, it will need negotiation with our Aboriginal brothers and sisters to know that we see that commitment to ATSIC as being a solid and firm one and yet at the same time, it is possible that we can more adequately perhaps look after the interests and the culture of Islander people. To see that it is not subsumed in any other culture - Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal.

At any rate, I am pleased to be here today to see the Torres Strait or the part of it I can see. To come to Thursday Island, to see you as a community, to be among you, to speak with you and to receive your hospitality. I thank you for the warmth of it. I most especially thank the children for coming in such numbers. For all you people who have been so generous in coming to meet me, my family and my party today, I give you my heartfelt thanks and best wishes.

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