



4

PRIME MINISTER

8 February 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS AT NATIONAL ANGLICAN CONFERENCE
Exploring our Future: Australia in the Family of Nations
ANU, CANBERRA**

E & OE

To Archbishop Rayner, the Primate of the Anglican Church in Australia; Archbishop Harry Goodhew, the Archbishop of Sydney; to Kim Beazley, the Leader of the Opposition; ladies and gentlemen.

It's quite a privilege for me to be here this morning and I want first of all to congratulate the Anglican Church in organising, what I understand to be, your first national conference. It is, if I may say so, a very sensible and forward looking move to focus the thoughts and the activities and the energies of the members of the Church on the Church's role in Australian society in the late 1990s and also to throw forward to the next millennium.

The coming of a new millennium is focusing the minds of many organisations and many groups of people within Australia. I suspect that the year 2001 will be a catalyst in many ways as Australians together look towards the next century and the next millennium. And I emphasise that word together because it is important as the Primate said in his introductory remarks, that we endeavour as far as possible as Australians to focus on those things that unite us and bind us together rather than those things that may push us apart. Powerful, legitimate, partisan debate is a necessary and healthy part of the activity not only of a nation in its political dimension but also within the Churches in their spiritual and other dimensions.

I also want, as Prime Minister of Australia - and I know speaking on behalf of a vast cross-section of the Australian community - to express my gratitude and the gratitude of the nation for the contribution that the Anglican Church and indeed the other Christian Churches make to the life and the times of our society. And that gratitude is expressed not only in relation to the spiritual contribution that is made to the nation

and to the lives and the families within the nation, but also to the massive social and compassionate contribution that the Churches make to Australian society.

Too often I think in modern times that role is forgotten and overlooked. The flaws are trivialised and emphasised. The massive ongoing compassionate contribution made by the Churches and their various agencies is greatly overlooked.

Australia would be a poorer, meaner, less hospitable, less compassionate society were it not for organisations like Anglicare, the society of St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, the Wesley Mission, the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, and the list is very long and very impressive. And the contribution that those organisations make and the people within those organisations, many of whom I guess will be here or represented here today, is something that ought not to go unremarked. Because one of the distinctive Australian traditions of which I am immensely proud, and of which all of us should be immensely proud, is that great tradition of voluntarism. And that great tradition of voluntarism is very powerfully expressed in the life and the work of the various Christian Churches.

And I want to take the opportunity as the leader of the Government of Australia to record my thanks. Too often on occasions such as this thanks are not recorded and acknowledgment is not given and respect is not paid for the massive contribution that is made quite selflessly to those in our community who are less fortunate.

I've been invited to share a few thoughts with you today about the role of Australia in the family of nations. I don't want to particularly address that in a political or in an economic dimension although those dimensions are immensely important and it is simply not real life to address many of the challenges that face Australia without giving pride of place to those two particular dimensions.

But when I think of Australia's role in the family of nations I think of what the rest of the world sees of Australia and sees what Australia represents. And in trying to project Australia forward as part of the family of nations I think not just of our economic achievements, not just of our economic strengths and our political stances, but I also think of the values for which Australia stands. I think of those values that we have in common with many nations around the world.

I am reminded that Australia is one of only eight nations that has been continuously democratic for the whole of the 20th century. Many nations of course lost their democracy and their freedom in the 20th century through no fault of their own. But it is no mean achievement that Australia is one of only eight nations that has retained democracy throughout the entire 20th century.

And we share many values in common with other nations. The shared entitlement of all people to self dignity and self fulfilment. The relevance of a common humanity. The common search for peace, and a liberal - I don't mean that in a political sense but in a generic sense - commitment to the worth of all people as individuals.

When I think of Australia's projection to the world I think that we must see that the strength of any nation or any community does not rest alone in the strength of its

economy or in the wealth of its individuals. But it does rest very much in the moral strengths and the importance of values within the community.

I think also when we project to the rest of the world we ought to place emphasis on those characteristics of our which are distinctively Australian are home grown and have been imported from nowhere. The emphasis we place on mateship, on adaptability, on down to earth practicality, vitality, concern for the underdog, straight forwardness, the spirit of constructive defiance against the odds so magnificently demonstrated right at the moment in Queensland in the area in and around Charleville.

I think also of the importance that we give to promoting fairness and decency and a quality of opportunity in our national life. I think sensibly we are a fundamentally quite sceptical people when it comes to the operations and the limits of government. Scepticism may of course present particular challenges to the evangelising and theological role of the Church, but within a nation it can be a great strength because it can protect the people against the inducements and the blandishments of charlatans and can provide a very powerful barrier to protect against the excessive concentration of power.

Government should also be limited, have a limited but strategic role. Its goals ought to be to facilitate unity, security, choice and opportunity and to give help to the disadvantaged.

I think also of the importance as a nation that we attach to the central role of family life within our community and the importance that public policy makers should place upon the role of the family within our society.

We have also of course a very strong commitment as a society to an effective social security safety net. Many elements of that safety net have enjoyed bi-partisan support across the political divide within Australia for many years.

I think also of our capacity to project to the rest of the world an impression of tolerance and acceptance of diversity of culture, diversity of ethnicity and of diversity of view. It remains the fact that Australia, particularly in the last 20 or 30 years, has had a profoundly honoured place amongst the nations in its willingness to accept people from the four corners of the earth. It ought to be a matter of immense pride that this country in the late 1970s received on a per capita basis more refugees from war torn Indo-China than any other nation in the world.

There is strong bi-partisan support for a non-discriminatory immigration policy. There remains legitimate room for vigorous debate on the level of the migrant intake. But that that intake will occur on grounds that are completely oblivious to race ethnicity and country of origin remains a bi-partisan constant in Australian politics.

We would also, in projecting to the world, be a nation that is willing to face both the benefits and the burdens of our history. To recognise that we as a nation have achieved many things together. To recognise that there have been blemishes and stains in our past.

Our attempts to achieve genuine forward looking reconciliation between all Australians and most particularly between Australians of a non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent and the original inhabitants of this country remains a major challenge for the Australian community. But I say that optimistically, I say that positively, I say that deliberately using the expression forward looking. In my view the true path to reconciliation lies in removing current disadvantage and working together for a brighter shared future.

The Primate mentioned the discussions that are now going on between my Government and various sections of the community regarding the appropriate response to the decision of the High Court in the Wik case. It is a profoundly difficult issue and a effective resolution of it will require of all those involved an understanding and a willingness to appreciate the others point of view. There is no monopoly of righteousness, there is no monopoly of wisdom on this particular issue enjoyed by one particular section of the Australian community.

I have made it clear that in my own handling of the matter only two things are, as it were, untouchable. The first of those are the basic principles which underlaid the decision of the High Court of Australia in the original Mabo case. In other words the concept of Native Title which was a new concept to Australian law created by the decision of the High Court in the Mabo case. And the other, of course, is the belief that absolutely nothing need be done in the wake of the High Court's decision in the Wik case because that decision did alter quite fundamentally the original basis on which the Native Title Act had been framed.

I am approaching that issue with complete openness and good will towards those involved. I am already well into consultations. Further consultations I hope involve all of the interested parties at a national level will take place within the next couple of weeks. And out of that we will be able to see whether any common ground can be achieved.

But it is important on issues such as that as the Primate said, that time be taken to reach a just decision and a decision and an outcome that gives to all Australians a sense of predicability, a sense of fairness and a sense of security. So when I think of the projection of my country and our country to the rest of the world I think of the projection of its values and its belief. I think of the projection of its capacity to solve in a compassionate, fair and descent manner the internal challenges that it faces. I think the willingness of people to put aside their partisan differences and unite to achieve such things as national gun laws sent a very powerful message to the rest of the world that here was a group of people faced with a particular challenge that were prepared to put aside their differences and they were prepared quite determinately to move away from going down one path that would, in my view, have led to greater sadness and greater destruction within our community and quite determinately go down another path which I believe over time will produce a more positive and a more benign outcome.

When we project to the rest of the world we should never be reluctant to project those particular characteristics of us as Australians which have always marked us out from the rest of the world. In an age of globalisation and internationalisation a delicate

balance must always be struck between universal fraternity amongst the nations but also retaining those features and those characteristics which enable those from other countries to instantly recognise that we come from a country called Australia. And those traditional characteristics and values which we have nurtured and developed and added to and moulded and changed over the years are part of the enduring and very endearing Australian story.

Ladies and gentlemen I thank you again for the privilege of addressing you this morning. I congratulate the Anglican Church on its sense of vision and perspective in putting together this national conference. I have a sense of great optimism and hope about the future of Australia. I have a sense of optimism and hope about the capacity for those forces within our community working towards positive outcomes in the defence and the promotion of values within our society. I have a positive and very optimistic view about their capacity to influence the affairs of the nation.

I respect and value the views of the Churches expressed on so many issues. I don't always agree with them. I don't always quite know who is speaking on occasions for the Church or for some. But can I assure all of you as representatives of the Anglican Church as I did recently in a discussion with Cardinal Clancy speaking on behalf of the Catholic Church to me about certain matters, as I would to the leaders and the representatives of any of the Christian Churches or other religious communities in Australia, that my Government will always listen carefully to what you have to say. We won't, as I said, always be able to agree with it. We will expect that on occasions you will be critical of us as you will be critical of other political movements. But the important thing is that you have a valued role in the wider activities of the Australian community, a role that I respect and a role that I will always deal with very openly and very forthrightly.

Thank you for having me and I hope you have an immensely successful and rewarding conference.

ends