



A handwritten mark, possibly a signature or initials, consisting of a large, stylized letter 'D' or similar shape.

PRIME MINISTER

1 May 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
PRESS CONFERENCE - SYDNEY
- FOLLOWING GOVERNMENT BACKBENCH ABORIGINAL
AFFAIRS COMMITTEE MEETING -**

E & OE.....

Good afternoon. Well, ladies and gentlemen we've had a very lengthy meeting of the Government Members' Backbench Committee on the Wik issue. I am at the moment arranging for the release of the 10 point plan. What will happen now is that I will have further discussion with my Cabinet colleagues. Legislation will be drafted to give expression to the 10 point plan and that legislation will of course be submitted to the Party Room for approval and I will have further discussions with the Party Room as well on general issue.

I thought we made a lot of progress today and I thought it was a very productive, although lengthy meeting on a very complex issue. The great thing about my plan is that it guarantees farmers the right to run their properties without interference from anybody and it also respects native title. It restores to farmers the uncertainty created by the Wik decision. It removes, I'm sorry, the uncertainty for farmers created by the Wik decision. It empowers farmers to run and manage their properties and it provides a fair basis of dealing with any claims for compensation. It delivers certainty to pastoralists but respects native title. It is the one fair, sensible, practicable way of resolving an extraordinarily difficult issue which if allowed to drag on for months of disputation and argument will paralyse mining development in parts of Australia, create tension between different sections of the Australian community and further depress rural and regional areas of Australia.

Anybody who believes that the interests of rural Australia lie in further delay on this issue misunderstand the problems that face rural Australia. Those who say to rural Australia that their best bet lies in further delay and further disputation are doing a disservice to rural Australia. What the farmers of Australia want is certainty, this will give it to them. What the Aborigines of Australia want is respect for native title, this

will give it to them. And what all the Australian people want is a solution that we can all honourably accept and live with and this will deliver that solution.

JRNLS:

Prime Minister, so when you talk about delay are you suggesting that one line extinguishment would be the cause?

PRIME MINISTER:

One line extinguishment could create months and months, perhaps several years of additional delay, of course it could. One line extinguishment would at the very least have little chance of passing through the Federal Parliament. One line extinguishment could be subject to major constitutional challenge. One line extinguishment could result in a huge compensation bill. One line extinguishment would be seen as inflaming this issue, not soothing it.

JRNLS:

On the basis of today's reaction to the backbench committee meeting are you confident of overwhelming support of your 10 point plan, Prime Minister?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, I believe that as people come to understand the certainty that this plan delivers to Australia's farmers and that it respects native title, they will embrace it. I thought I made a lot of progress today when I had the detail of it explained and people were impressed at the way in which the plan did provide certainty in management. I can understand the superficial appeal, the simplistic appeal of one line extinguishment, I understand that and I understand the anger of the farmers but can I say to the farmers of Australia, this will give you what you want in a way that can be achieved without unnecessary pain and delay.

JRNLS:

Bob Katter and Bill O'Chee seem unconvinced today.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I didn't really expect to convince either of them.

JRNLS:

Are they speaking on behalf of the National Party MPs or ...?

PRIME MINISTER:

No I don't think so. There were a lot of other National Party MPs there today that didn't say the same things as they did. I mean, Bob and Bill have gone out on a limb on this and they can hardly change their minds.

JRNLS:

Prime Minister how hard initially do you think this has been and is going to prove, to continue to prove given people like Bill O'Chee and Bob Katter?

PRIME MINISTER:

I mean this is a difficult issue. It is a difficult issue for the whole country. And Government is not a bed of roses. I won't lapse into one of my predecessor's immortal expressions on this subject but it's part of the territory. You have to expect difficult issues and none is more difficult because what you're dealing with is an unprecedented clash, I suppose, of the interests of a group of Australians who for generations have believed that they were deprived and dispossessed, and as a group are the least well endowed of all Australians and that's the Aborigines and they have rights and interests and they are entitled to be treated with respect. And on the other hand you have a group of people, the farmers, who have really done it hard and then suddenly had cast over them this great pall of uncertainty. Now, what my plan does is to cater for both concerns. It respects the rights of the Aborigines but it also redelivers security to farmers. The great message out of my package is that farmers can run their properties without interference from anybody.

JRNLS:

So what happens from here, Prime Minister? When will this become legislation?

PRIME MINISTER:

As soon as possible. I mean, the overwhelming desire of people in that room today was to get this thing behind them.

JRNLS:

Can you get legislation in in the Budget session?

PRIME MINISTER:

I will give instructions for legislation to be drafted immediately and I've got to go back and talk to the Cabinet but the States are anxious to see the legislation and I have agreed in the drafting of the legislation to heavily involve the officials of the States because this is very much a land management issue and the states are entitled to be involved and I will be having further discussions with the Aboriginal leaders and I will have some further discussions with the mining industry and the National Farmers' Federation. I can understand the circumspection of some of the rural groups because

they were duded in 1993 and they don't want to be duded again but can I tell you, this is the, the least duddable piece of legislation that the rural community of Australia has ever seen.

JRNLS:

You mentioned the Aboriginal leadership a moment ago. As you know, the negotiators, including Gatjil Djerrkura, accused you of not negotiating in good faith on this issue among other things. What can you do, do you think, to bring them back into the (inaudible) as it were?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, there are a lot of things said in the heat of the moment on these issues. I thought the Chairman of the Council for Reconciliation said on Anzac Day that I was fair dinkum and I am and I've always been fair dinkum with the Aborigines and I've never disguised the fact that Wik could not remain undiminished. I've never disguised that fact. I've always said to the Aboriginal community that in the eyes of the Australian public and in reality the pendulum had swung a little too far and it had to come back to the centre and what my legislation does is to bring it back to the centre where most people want it to be. They don't want the Aborigines ignored. They want the concept of native title preserved but they do not want pastoralists to be left unable to manage their properties without complete certainty and this package will say to the farmers of Australia, you've got your properties, you can do what you want to do without having to get the permission of anybody.

JRNLS:

The other day you took on notice as it were the question of whether or not you would consider using the land fund as a basis for compensation for your ten point plan. Have you had any further thoughts on that since you... have you taken advice?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, beyond what I said the other day, I mean anything is a possibility, but I haven't really, I have not really had any time to give thought to that. I have been too busy talking to people about the detail of the plan. I will have a look at that. You've got to remember that one of the bases on which the land fund was established, my recollection is that this was mentioned in the second reading speech or it may have been referred to at the time by the former Prime Minister was that pastoral leases had extinguished native title.

JRNLS:

But wasn't the reasons that the land fund, or one of the underpinnings of the land fund was for people who had no hope of making, provide for the most dispossessed, those who had no hope?

PRIME MINISTER:

You can rest assured that, you know, I am not going to rule anything out but we're obviously not going to be unfair.

JRNLSST:

Can you brief us on any changes or anything you firmed up today, any fine tuning of the ten point plan?

PRIME MINISTER:

There was really virtually no fine tuning today. I think the great advantage of today was that people, some people for the first time really understood it and when they understood it they realised the enormous steps that the Government has taken to enable farmers to run their affairs.

JRNLSST:

Prime Minister, Bob Katter spoke about modifications that you would consider. Can you give us some information about modifications?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, they're not areas, there are a few what I would call procedural things that we've been willing to look at but the main tenets of the plan remain the same.

JRNLSST:

As far as you're concerned, is the hardest part of selling this plan now behind you?

PRIME MINISTER:

I never make those sort of rash predictions. I have always, I have believed for some time that this was the fair way of handling this problem and I knew it would be difficult. I can understand why some people in rural Australia are concerned. They were let down I think in 1993. They were misled by a lot of people in 1993 and they're a little suspicious at the moment and I happen to have the opportunity of reassuring them that farmers of Australia can rely on John Howard. John Howard will never desert the farmers of Australia. They are the last group in the Australian community I would ever desert.

Thank you.