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PRIME MINISTER

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP OPENING ADDRESS TO THE AUSTRALIAN RECONCILIATION CONVENTION - MELBOURNE

E&OE.....

Thank you very much. To Patrick Dodson, the Chairman of the Council; to Your Excellency, the Governor of Victoria, Sir James Gobbo; the Premier of Victoria, Mr Jeff Kennett; Mr Beazley, the Leader of the Opposition; Senator Kernot; other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Can I say how very pleased I am to be here today to formally open this convention and let me also thank the Kulin people for the warmth and generosity of their welcome.

This Convention is a unifying event. It is an occasion for positive commitment to the future and a common avowal of the destiny we all share as Australians. It is an occasion also for frank speaking and there has been some today quite appropriately and in the same spirit I intend to speak frankly although I hope on all occasions respectfully.

Since the inception of the Council in 1991, the Coalition Parties have committed themselves to the reconciliation process and today, on behalf of the Liberal and National parties, I reaffirm that commitment.

At the heart of this reconciliation process among Australians lies three fundamental objectives:

- the first is a shared commitment to raise the living standards and broadening the opportunities available to the most disadvantaged group in Australian society and that is indigenous Australians - and that must be done as part of a broader commitment to providing equality of opportunity to all Australians

- a second objective is a realistic acknowledgment of the inter-related histories of the various elements of Australian society;
- and a third is a mutual acceptance of the importance of working together to respect and appreciate our differences and to ensure that they do not prevent us from sharing the future.

In meeting these challenges, the reconciliation process must focus on the future in a positive and principled way. Specific strategies need to be devised, specific priorities need to be identified and specific practical programmes need to be agreed and implemented. This process quite properly will generate debate and in some areas genuine differences of opinion amongst people of goodwill about competing priorities.

I hope that all who participate in this convention can find important areas of common ground on the best way of achieving the broad goals to which the reconciliation process is committed.

As Patrick has reminded us the Convention has been preceded by over 100 formal meetings attended by more than 10,000 people. Many of these meetings have focussed on what people in their own communities can do to advance the cause of reconciliation. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the essence of true reconciliation. Governments and leaders alone cannot make reconciliation happen simply through legislation, decrees, declarations or rhetoric. True reconciliation must come from the hearts and minds of the Australian people, in the respect they have for differences, in the attitudes they encourage in their children, and in their recognition of the common destiny we share together as Australians.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am an optimist about the process of national reconciliation in Australia.

I am an optimist about reconciliation because I believe in the decency, tolerance, generosity and common sense of the Australian people.

I am an optimist because I know that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are committed to preserving their unique culture at the same time as reaching out to non-indigenous Australians to build a shared future.

I am an optimist because I believe that the Australian people respect the right to a 'fair go' for all irrespective of colour, background or belief; and I am an optimist because I believe that these attributes have made Australia one of the fairest, most egalitarian and tolerant societies in the world.

But this optimism, my friends, about the reconciliation process cannot be blind. We must be realistic in acknowledging some of the threats to reconciliation.

Reconciliation will not work if it puts a higher value on symbolic gestures and overblown promises rather than the practical needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in areas like health, housing, education and employment.

It will not work if it is premised solely on a sense of national guilt and shame . Rather we should acknowledge past injustices and focus our energies on addressing the root causes of current and future disadvantage among our indigenous people.

Nor will the reconciliation process work effectively if one of its central purposes becomes the establishment of different systems of accountability and lawful conduct among Australians on the basis of their race or any other factor.

The reconciliation process will only work effectively if it involves and inspires all Australians.

Reconciliation is not helped if its critics are able to claim that resources directed towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are disadvantaged have not been well or wisely used.

However much some may wish to believe otherwise, there is evidence that some programmes designed to address indigenous disadvantaged have, in fact, encouraged dependency rather than individual initiative and personal responsibility.

Ladies and gentlemen there can be little doubt that the reconciliation process has been hindered by the divisiveness and misinformation generated by certain extremist views in our community.

It cannot seriously be argued that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not, as a group, profoundly disadvantaged.

To suggest otherwise is to ignore reality, substitute fiction for fact and unrepresentative anecdotes for credible statistical proof.

Equally, the cause of reconciliation is also damaged by those who are intolerant or misleading for the opposite purpose.

Calls for disruption of the Sydney Olympic Games and trade boycotts of Australia, baseless allegations about a return to White Australia policies and charges of racism relentlessly directed against those who disagree with a particular point of view have all been very counter-productive.

'We need to reject extremist views on all sides. Australia's future will be best served by openness, tolerance, fairness and confidence in our Australian values. It will not be built on heavy-handed threats, cheap sloganeering or empty populism - whatever its source.

We need, my friends, to re-embrace the three great goals of the reconciliation process to which I have referred.

First, we need a renewed national focus on the true causes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage.

For my Government, this is the cornerstone of the reconciliation process.

It is why we have given such priority to programmes that directly target indigenous disadvantage in health, housing, education and employment.

It is why we are focussing Government resources on these areas in a way that will achieve the best outcome.

Our aim is for indigenous Australians to have greater control over their own lives and their own communities.

This will be achieved through sensitivity to the cultural needs of indigenous people and the ending of their cycle of dependency.

We have breathed new life into the COAG agreement on *National Commitment to Improved Outcomes in the Delivery of Programmes and Services for Indigenous people*.

Bilateral health agreements are now in place in all but two States and bilateral indigenous housing agreements are well advanced in most States.

We have boosted funding for indigenous business development and, through the new *Indigenous Business Incentive Programmes*, we will be assisting economic independence in the indigenous community.

Through a Commonwealth Government initiative, we have brought the Army, ATSIC and the Department of Health and Family Services together in a pilot program to address water supply and broader environmental health needs.

In a period of necessary and tight fiscal restraint, to which all areas of Government spending have been subjected, we have either quarantined the areas of greatest need in indigenous communities, or actually increased funding.

In overall terms we are committed to spend over \$428 million more on indigenous specific programs in our first four years than was spent during the previous four years. What we have sought to do is to target this expenditure at the areas of greatest need.

This practical, on-the-ground approach will remain a primary focus of our policy making. This is because we believe it will bring about true social justice for indigenous Australians.

Second, all Australians - indigenous and otherwise - need to acknowledge realistically the interaction of our histories.

Our purpose in doing so should not be to apportion blame and guilt for past wrongs, but to commit to a practical programme of action that will remove the enduring legacies of disadvantage.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge openly that the treatment accorded to many indigenous Australians over a significant period of European settlement represents the most blemished chapter in our history.

Clearly, there were injustices done and no-one should obscure or minimise them. We need to acknowledge as a nation what European settlement has meant for the first Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in particular the assault on their traditions and the discrimination and violence they endured over many decades.

This week the report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission inquiry into *The Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* will be tabled in Parliament. Like all such reports, it will be subjected to proper analysis and scrutiny.

It will neither be uncritically accepted nor summarily swept aside.

However, let me make this clear. Personally, I feel deep sorrow for those of my fellow Australians who suffered injustices under the practices of past generations towards indigenous people. Equally, I am sorry for the hurt and trauma many people here today may continue to feel as a consequence of those practices.

In facing the realities of the past, however, we must not join those who would portray Australia's history since 1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism, exploitation and racism.

Such a portrayal is a gross distortion and deliberately neglects the overall story of great Australian achievement that is there in our history to be told, and such an approach will be repudiated by the overwhelming majority of Australians who are proud of what this country has achieved although inevitably acknowledging the blemishes in its past history.

Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control.

However, we must acknowledge past wrongs, understand that they still cause a great deal of personal distress and resolve to improve areas of indigenous disadvantage both now and into the future.

The third broad objective of the reconciliation process on which attention should be refocussed is the need to work together to ensure that our differences do not prevent us from sharing in a common future.

All Australians, irrespective of their background or colour or belief or religion, share a common destiny.

We all have rights and obligations as Australians.

These rights include the right to individual self-fulfilment and cultural freedom without discrimination and intimidation. They include the right of all Australians to dignity and self-respect.

We cannot share a common destiny if these rights are available to some Australians, but not all.

Likewise, we cannot share a common destiny together as Australians if different groups in our society have different standards of conduct and different systems of accountability.

I know that the goals of the reconciliation process have been subjected to tension and strain as a result of the current debate on Native Title issues.

You will all be aware that I have spent a great deal of time in trying to find a just, fair and workable outcome to the in response to the decision of the High Court of Australia in the Wik case. In working towards that solution, my Government's primary goal has been to strike a fair and reasonable balance between the rights of indigenous people and the rights of other Australians, in particular those in the pastoral and mining industries.

I have heard what has been said here today, I can only remark that the myths that were abroad in Longreach have been repeated although on the opposite side of the argument in some of the observations that have been made here today. I need to remind you in asking you to consider and to understand the approach of my Government for the Wik decision.

The recitals that were contained in the Native Title Act 1993, the declarations that were made about the impact of pastoral leases on Native Title by my predecessor, the Labor Prime Minister of Australia, and by a number of leaders in the indigenous community of Australia who are present in this auditorium.

I also need in the name of truth and in the name of a frank discussion of this issue to repudiate the claim that my ten point plan involves a massive hand-out of freehold title at taxpayer expense. That is an absolute myth, it is absolutely contrary to the fact and I absolutely repudiate it.

I believe that the plan which I have put forward provides an equitable balance between respect for the principles of Native Title, as laid down in the Mabo decision, and the very legitimate interests of pastoralists and others in securing certainty in carrying on and planning their activities.

I understand the heat and passions that this issue has generated on both sides of the debate and I believe that a fair and equitable outcome and I believe that my ten point plan provides the only basis of a proper approach.

I want to conclude my remarks today in the same tone as I began - with a vigorous reaffirmation of my Government's commitment to a successful and ongoing process of national reconciliation which is developed in a climate of mutual trust and confidence.

This is a process which draws on Australians from all walks of life and all kinds of backgrounds. What brings them together is a faith in the power of Australian values - the values of decency, tolerance, fairness and down-to-earth common sense.

What inspires the process of national reconciliation, and what gives it its enduring strength, is the conviction that we can, and must, develop our future together as Australians with mutual respect for, and appreciation of our differences and with a unifying commitment to promoting Australia's national interests.

That is what this Convention is all about. It is about our future together as Australians, and the kind of country we will hand on to our children.

I wish Pat Dodson, his fellow members of the Reconciliation Council and all others involved in this Convention my very best wishes for a successful, positive and purposeful outcome over the next three days.

I have great pleasure in formally declaring this Convention open.

Thank you.