

9 July 1997



**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP
ADDRESS TO THE TORRES STRAIT REGIONAL AUTHORITY
THURSDAY ISLAND**

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Well, Mr Chairman, to John Herron, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, to Warren Entsch, the Federal Member for Leichhardt, to Mr John Abednego, to Mr Getano Lui, to other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls, the people of the Torres Strait Islands, all of you together my fellow Australians.

Can I say how delighted I am and how touched I am at the warmth of the welcome and the generosity and the enthusiasm at the welcome that I have received from the people of the Torres Strait Islands on this very brief visit of mine to Thursday Island.

It is, I must confess, the first occasion that I have visited any part of the Torres Strait Islands. That is my omission. But in the time that I've been here, the few short hours that I've been here, I have been reminded of a number of things. The most important thing I've been reminded of is the distinctive, special, atypical culture of the people of the Torres Strait Islands. And the claims that you rightly have to a separate identification, the claims that you rightly have to separating out your authorities and your council from ATSIC have been reinforced in my mind by the time that I've spent here on Thursday Island.

You will be aware that since my Government came to office in March of last year we have provided separate budget appropriations for Torres Strait Island affairs. And I can confirm to you today that we will legislate in our first term to establish a separate authority in relation to governance of the affairs of the Torres Strait Islander people.

I've been reminded of a number of other important things too by my visit. Of the tremendous diversity and therefore the tremendous strength through that diversity of the Australian nation. To experience the different culture, an ancient culture, a culture in which you rightly take immense pride, a culture that you have nurtured often in difficult adverse circumstances and to know that your affection for that culture and your desire to retain it remains as strong today as it was generations ago is a very impressive reminder of the diversity and therefore the strength of the Australian community and the Australian nation.

I've also been reminded of the great importance to the people of the Torres Strait Islands of, as the Mayor, Pedro Stephen, pointed out in his speech, the great strength of family life within the communities of the Torres Strait Islands. Indeed the strength of the family life of the Torres Strait Islander people is something of an exemplar to the rest of Australia. And the rest of Australia would profit enormously in so many ways if we're able to match and emulate the strength of the family life of the people of the Torres Strait Islands.

You do occupy a very special place in the Australian nation. You played a very special role in the history of the Australian nation. We hold this gathering beside a memorial to people of the Torres Strait who gave their lives defending Australia in World War II. And the response of the people of the Torres Strait to the threats of Australia in World War II is something to which the rest of the Australian nation could be enormously grateful.

I want to, though, take the opportunity before you of thanking John Herron, my Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, for the tremendous job that he has done in representing the policies of the Government in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. He brings to that position great skill, great compassion and a great understanding of many of the needs and challenges particularly, but not only, in the area of health and education of the people of the Torres Strait.

I also acknowledge the presence and thank Warren Entsch, the Federal Member for Leichhardt, for the invitation that he has extended to me.

The last thing that I want to say to you my friends is simply this, that we are as a people incredibly fortunate to be Australians. We are as a nation, I think, strengthened and enriched by the great diversity that we have. There is something particular about visiting a part of ones country and to be reminded of a centuries old culture which is distinct and different and separate in so many ways from the culture of so much of the mainland of Australia. Yet over the last two centuries we have shared so much together that in recognising the separate nature of our cultural backgrounds we are nonetheless reinforced through the shared historical experiences of being Australians together in this nation.

It's been a learning experience for me to come to Thursday Island. I'm humbled by the generosity of the welcome that I have received. I am impressed by the spirituality of the people of the Torres Strait Islands. I applaud the tenacity with which you have preserved your culture and your identity and I commit my Government to appropriately honouring the separate character and identity and the desire of the people of the Torres Strait to maintain that. I wish you all good fortune for the future and I thank you most warmly for your very generous and open and warm welcome to Thursday Island.

Thank you.