

10 July 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP
RADIO TRANSCRIPT
TORRES STRAIT ISLAND MEDIA ASSOCIATION INTERVIEW**

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PRESENTER:

Honourable Prime Minister, on behalf of Torres Strait Islanders listening to our broadcast, I take this once in a lifetime opportunity to welcome you to our programme this morning. Welcome to the programme.

PRIME MINISTER:

It's terrific to be here. I feel completely at home. I'm in a radio studio and it really is nice to be here. This is my first visit to Thursday Island and it's certainly my first visit as Prime Minister and it's a real experience and I can say already that the people of the island have demonstrated their traditional hospitality, openness and friendliness and I have just visited the Star of the Sea nursing home complex and the obvious happiness of the residents and the commitment and the quality of care is a demonstration of not only the quality of that particular establishment, also the culture of this island and the caring disposition for which Torres Strait Islanders have a great reputation.

PRESENTER:

Mr Prime Minister, there are a number of issues that you may want to talk about. I thought for a moment that we will focus, concentrate entirely on the regional concerns. Recently the Torres Strait Regional Authority proposed a major infrastructure and housing development programme for this region in the form of a tripartite memorandum of understanding between the State and the Commonwealth Government. As Prime Minister of Australia what sort of commitment is coming from...

PRIME MINISTER:

We have had a look at that in a preliminary way and we are still examining the proposal that has been put forward. I have had the opportunity this morning of talking to a number of your representatives who have pointed out some of the housing infrastructure limitations and I am not in a position at the moment to give you a firm answer - yes, no or somewhere in the middle, and I guess any of those alternatives are available but we are looking at it in a very serious fashion. It is something that you proposed in partnership with the Queensland Government as well, the Queensland Government would be involved. We are examining it and at this stage I am not in a position to say yes or no but we are giving it very serious consideration.

PRESENTER:

From the Commonwealth also, is that the way that we are seeing, coming from you as leader of the Federal Government, that there are moves towards greater autonomous control?

PRIME MINISTER:

Very strongly we recognise the distinctive character, the distinctive culture and the distinctive approach of the Torres Strait Islander people. You will be aware that you now have a separate budget allocation which is in no way filtered through ATSIC and is really a matter now between you and my colleague and friend, the Minister. On top of that, we are moving towards legislation to have a separate administrative structure for Torres Strait Islanders. Now this is a recognition that Torres Strait Islanders have a unique, special, distinctive role within the indigenous people of

Australia and they deserve to have their own structures, they deserve to have their own ways of determining things as part of the broader Australian community and we are certainly committed to delivering that autonomy and to separating the administration and decision making process out from ATSIC and I know that is something that the Torres Strait Islander people have been campaigning for for a long time and we are certainly going to deliver on that. We made that plain before the last election and John Herron, who is I think on his fourth visit to Thursday Island in the space of only 16 months as Minister, John has repeated that commitment and I reaffirm it today in talking to your listeners.

PRESENTER:

So by the year 2000...

PRIME MINISTER:

Yes I think that's a reasonable target, I really do.

PRESENTER:

Canberra will become closer to the Torres Strait?

PRIME MINISTER:

You can put it that way, yes. Having sort of looked at the scenery up here and I was talking to my colleague, Warren Entsch about it, if you let too many Canberrans visit this place you would have, you would close the gap completely between the Torres Strait and Canberra. It's a very attractive part of the world.

PRESENTER:

Closing the gap, and on another issue now in regards to surveillance concerns, and recently we've had 139 illegal immigrants come this way unnoticed. This is a concern that will be raised by our leaders to you in regards to the process of maybe greater policing by local people in the communities.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I was struck when I came over on the naval vessel this morning with the, just when you see it all, the ease of access that people have and I can tell you that I am going to have an examination undertaken of the adequacy of the surveillance mechanisms that exist at the present time. You actually have to come here to realise just how potentially vulnerable this part of Australia is to illegal incursion and I am going to have the whole gamut of surveillance mechanisms that exist in this part of the world re-examined. I've got an open mind at this stage as to whether any change or upgrading is required but having been through those waters this morning, you can easily see how people who meant no goodwill towards Australia and were engaged in illegal activities, illicit activities, how easy it would be for those people to run the gauntlet of the resources that are available. I think the people, the naval personnel who are there and the police and so forth, they do a terrific job but it's a vast area. There's a large number of islands and the resources are quite limited so I am going to quite seriously re-examine all of that and if more resources as a result of that re-examination are needed, well they will be made available because it is a fundamental responsibility of the national government to ensure that proper surveillance is available and it's a fundamental requirement of the national Government to see that it's responsibilities in relation to immigration control, in relation to things such as weapons and drugs and so forth are met.

PRESENTER:

Federal Police is another issue that I really wanted to...

PRIME MINISTER:

It's all really tied up in the same thing. What I am going to do is to get all of the agencies of the Federal Government to get together and give me a consolidated update, a consolidated statement of what facilities are there and I am going to get some advice from Warren Entsch, who is the Federal Member for Leichhardt and of course as a member of the Government parties, as a member of the National Parliament, he is the first Federal Member to have an office on Thursday Island.

PRESENTER:

Second time.

PRIME MINISTER:

Second time, I'm sorry.

PRESENTER:

John Gayler was the...

PRIME MINISTER:

John Gayler did too. Well, he's got a very strong commitment and I think it would be very important to have his input as well.

PRESENTER:

Mr Prime Minister, we've run stories regularly here in the broadcast and one of those stories is the boycotting that is being done by Torres Strait Islanders that are into the movement monitoring offices that are based in the communities. Now they are boycotting all commonwealth functions on the islands regarding, they want to be recognised for the type of work that they do in the communities and I think that's going to be proposed to you by the leaders.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well I will talk to them about that. I will listen to what they've got to say.

PRESENTER:

I think on that note, Mr Prime Minister, it's been indeed an opportunity to talk to you.

PRIME MINISTER:

Well it's been very nice to talk to you. Can I just say to all of your listeners that it's a real privilege to be a guest of the Torres Strait Islander people here on Thursday Island. The welcome they've extended to me has been warm hearted and very cheery and I want to say that they do occupy, all of you, and I say this to the Torres Strait Islander people, you do occupy a special place in the Australian community, the Australian nation. You have been very loyal and very committed Australians down through the generations. Your role and assistance to the Australian effort during war time is remembered with great affection and understood and respected and revered by others who are involved in that effort. You do have a distinct culture, a special way of doing things, an island calm that is a great example to other Australians and one of the things that my visit today has done is to reinforce the commitment and respect that my Government has for the distinctive place of the Torres Strait Islander people within the broader Australian community.

PRESENTER:

Mr Prime Minister, that's all that we have time for and it's been a privilege talking to you this morning.

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