

Reconciliation in Australia Today

The Hon John Howard MP

Prime Minister of Australia

Sydney, December 2000

Ladies and gentlemen first may I acknowledge that I speak to you on the traditional lands of the Eora people.

I'd like to thank Andrew Robb and his team for arranging today's event - an opportunity to properly put into context the Government's approach to policies affecting indigenous Australians and how we may best move forward together towards a shared and prosperous future.

I am also pleased that this lecture series will later include contributions by Joseph Elu and Leon Davis. Both are prominent and highly respected Australians and will be able to offer useful insights into, the views held within their respective constituencies.

Today's address comes just a few days after the Government received the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the announcement of our support for a new body, Reconciliation Australia through seed finding and ongoing tax deductibility.

We have also committed to construct a site within the Parliamentary Triangle to be known as 'Reconciliation Place' to honour the importance of reconciliation in the nation's life and to recognise the shared journey between the different peoples of the Australian nation. It will also include a memorial and depiction of the removal of children from their families as part of the very difficult and traumatic experience of the indigenous people of this community.

As I did last week, I would like to acknowledge the dignified and inspiring leadership of Dr. Evelyn Scott and the fine work of the Council in general in promoting the cause of reconciliation throughout Australian society.

In just a few weeks, we begin celebrating the Centenary of our Federation. It will be a time when Australians will look back on past accomplishments but of equal importance, consider the type of nation and the type of people they wish to be in years to come.

I regard Australia's social cohesion, born out of a distinctive form of egalitarianism, as the crowning achievement of the Australian experience during the last one hundred years.

Yet we can never feel satisfied, nor can we feel complete, until that cohesion is extended throughout all sections of the community and specifically until indigenous Australians enjoy the same opportunities and the same plentiful lives as any other Australian.

This is significant because, as we approach the end of 2000, there can be no doubt that the mood of the Australian community is overwhelmingly in favour of reconciliation. Over the last twelve months in particular, it has become an unstoppable force and I believe the nation has been enriched and is a better, more united nation as a consequence.

In May, Australians witnessed Corroboree 2000, an historic event involving every political leader - State, Territory and Federal - in which a commitment to address ongoing indigenous disadvantage was made. And, importantly, a commitment to recognise the special status Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders are entitled to feel as Australia's first peoples.

On the same weekend, the walk across Sydney's Harbour Bridge gave an opportunity, the first of many, for Australians to demonstrate their strong support for the process of reconciliation.

There can be little doubt that the Olympics was a momentous and positive event for Australia and Australians and many people saw the Games as making a major contribution to furthering reconciliation.

Others felt their very success demonstrated that our nation was far more reconciled than had been previously allowed for. If true reconciliation is manifest by a sense of pride and unity shared by all Australians - indigenous and others - then the Games proved beyond doubt that Australians have travelled a great distance towards this goal. There can be nothing more crucial than preserving and nurturing this mood of public support if we are to complete the journey towards reconciliation.

For this reason, it is important to focus on building on the gains made over past years. I am reminded that the Council of Reconciliation's Corroboree 2000 vision acknowledged that there are many paths to reconciliation. That's true.

On issues as complex and difficult as the call for some form of legal treaty or formal national apology beyond expressions of personal sorrow and regret, people of genuine goodwill can and will legitimately hold different points of view.

It is important to acknowledge that reconciliation is, as I've said, now an unstoppable force and rather than a disproportionate focus on what is the preferred path, our collective priority must be to strengthen support for the ongoing process and, most importantly, improve the lives of indigenous Australians.

Whatever differences may be apparent, of emphasis and direction, in any meaningful discussion of indigenous issues, there are many more areas on which we can all agree.

I believe that, within the Australian community, a great level of goodwill exists towards the indigenous people of our nation and a determination is apparent to honour in a sensitive and understanding way the special place that they will always occupy in the life of this nation.

The respect owed to them now and into the future does not mean we are reluctant to acknowledge past injustices.

Indigenous Australians have suffered enormously in the past, and as a defined group, continue to do so. No one can, nor should attempt to, deny the devastating impact the introduction of western culture has had upon their civilisation.

I have said many times, there can be no doubt that the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in earlier times represents the most blemished chapter in our history. Most Australians accept that.

It remains true that basic living standards - from employment to health, from education to mortality rates - remain unacceptable.

It is true, as was noted recently that past policies designed to assist have often failed to recognise the significance of indigenous culture and resulted in the further marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the social, cultural and economic development of mainstream Australian society.

This led to a culture of dependency and victimhood, which condemned many indigenous Australians to lives of poverty and further devalued their culture in the eyes of their fellow Australians.

The inconsistencies between indigenous and non-indigenous approaches remain at the root of much of the current difficulty.

It is captured in what one commentator recently described as the gaps 'between immediate sharing and individual accumulation, between loyalty to kin and impartiality to all, between individual autonomy and the authoritarian practices of the school and industrial workplace, between individual advancement and remaining at one with the community, between exploiting land and living with it'.

We are determined to design policy and structure administrative arrangements to address these very real issues and ensure standards in education and employment, health and housing improve to a significant degree.

The Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation's vision seeks an Australia which not only promotes mutual respect but provides 'justice and equity for all'. Who would not agree? Yet the fulfillment of these two principles is inextricably bound to improving the day to day realities of life for indigenous Australians.

For this reason, our focus has been, and will be, on addressing the needs of today's Indigenous Australians. This is a living, active community, not a generation from the past.

These are people who can be found, not in the pages of history books, but in our cities, in our towns and in remote corners of our country. Among them are Australians whose children are sick, whose lives are empty, and whose prospects are dim. Among them are Australians who need our help.

Symbolic expressions of support are important. However, they are given real meaning when backed with improvements in living standards.

That is why we place a great degree of emphasis on practical reconciliation.

A measure of the genuineness of the government's commitment to practical reconciliation is that the \$2.3 billion now annually spent on Indigenous-specific programmes is, in real terms, a record for any government Coalition or Labor.

I have looked at the level of progress made over the past 20 years and while no one denies that as a nation we need to do better than we have in the past, there are examples of real achievement in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. I don't agree with those that say that the community has little to show for what is now some 30 years of effort. This criticism, that nothing is getting better, is common to both extremes of the debate - those who would abolish all such special programmes, and to those who say that nothing less than a legally enforceable treaty and special Constitutional rights will 'solve the problem'.

Neither view is correct, nor is the underlying premise that things haven't been improving. There is in fact indisputable evidence of long-term improvement in many Aboriginal socio-economic indicators.

For example, the proportion of indigenous Australians who own their own home has increased from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 since the 1970s.

The proportion of indigenous students completing high school has quadrupled over the same period. The infant mortality rate has been cut from up to 20 times the non-Aboriginal rate to 4 times the national average today.

Aboriginal enrolments in higher education increased by 60 percent in the 1990s.

At least 15 percent of the continent is now Aboriginal owned or controlled.

And the Aboriginal imprisonment rate relative to that of non-Aboriginals has been trending down (and over the past three years on average per capita deaths in prison custody for Aboriginals have been lower than for non-Aboriginals).

It is particularly encouraging that improvement is occurring through harnessing the talents, the resources and the enthusiasm of those within governments, within business, within community organisations and most importantly within indigenous communities themselves.

Whether you call it a social coalition or simply pulling together, it has particular relevance to indigenous issues.

For instance, the Army has been working alongside community members in some of the most needy Aboriginal communities in Australia, developing and building important infrastructure.

In Bulla, a remote community in the Northern Territory, ten new dwellings were built, a reticulated sewerage and septic system constructed and the community airstrip refurbished.

The success of such projects is not only measured by infrastructure improvements. In each community the Army has been able to deliver additional services such as primary health, dental and veterinary care as well as providing training opportunities for local community members ranging from health, hygiene and home management to trade and construction skills.

We have seen Australians within communities such as Moree decide they are simply not willing to allow division and disharmony to affect the day to day lives of their citizens and the future which awaits their children. Moree's Aboriginal Employment Strategy, managed and operated by Indigenous Australians and centred around the magnificent cotton growing industry of that region, works with both prospective employers and Aboriginals to find employment opportunities within mainstream sectors - retail, manufacturing and on farms.

Towns like Moree are proving the critical correlation which exists between employment and the restoration of fractured community leadership and cohesion.

For this reason, it is especially pleasing that some 34 major Australian corporations have given a commitment to the Government to generate more job opportunities for Indigenous Australians. The Commonwealth is funding a scheme to train one hundred trainees at the Century Mine project. Western Mining is set to employ a similar number of young Aboriginals on its mine sites in West Australia.

These types of initiatives are important to the reconciliation process. Yet true reconciliation can never be said to have occurred until indigenous Australians enjoy standards of opportunity and treatment the equal of their countrymen and women.

There are distinct and disturbing problems to be confronted if this equality is to be realised and I am heartened by the increasingly candid and open discussion of these complex issues by a number of courageous indigenous leaders.

This Government is guided in its policy deliberations by core Australian values.

And the principle of equity and a fair go, at the heart of the Australian character, is also at the heart of practical reconciliation programmes. It is a matter of basic Australian

fairness, and indeed basic Australian pragmatism, to seek to redress disadvantage, and poor education, to tackle systemic ill health and joblessness, to combat tragic levels of domestic violence and substance abuse.

But causing and sustaining many of these problems is the loss of dignity and specifically the loss of self reliance by individuals and their communities. And the promotion of this last virtue is a key goal of this Government.

We are gaining new understanding of the links between economic and social engagement. *The McClure Report* ranks paid employment as a major source of self esteem. Without it, people become disengaged from - or fail to develop - employment, family and community networks. Material poverty is compounded by poverty of purpose. And as the report makes clear this often leads to physical and psychological ill health - to life opportunities being reduced both for parents and their children.

Indigenous leaders are saying the same thing. Evelyn Scott regards welfare dependency as 'almost totally destroying Aboriginal culture'.

Peter Yu asserts that communities are being 'crushed with the weight of the welfare economy'.

And Noel Pearson argues persuasively that 'the scale and nature of indigenous problems changed dramatically after passive welfare become the economic foundation of their communities'. He contends there is a causal connection between the change in their economy and their social relationships' and it is 'passive welfare combined with substance abuse that threatens to disrupt traditional values' - values which had previously mandated reciprocity and responsibility.

My point is this. Through policy initiatives that will flow from perceptive investigations such as *The McClure Report*, we can develop new and better ways to empower individuals and promote self reliance throughout their communities. New and better ways to help all Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous.

As I said earlier, this Government is committed to maintaining and strengthening broad based support for reconciliation and for proper respect to be shown towards Australia's first peoples - the respect so evident in past months.

True reconciliation is, in our view, to be best found within practical means to improve the well-being and happiness of indigenous Australians and raising standards to levels enjoyed and expected by all of us.

There have been very real resources applied to this end. A 50% increase in spending on Aboriginal health since we won office.

A national indigenous literacy and numeracy strategy. Housing programmes which account for 20% of estimated total Commonwealth spending on public and community

housing. And in this year's budget, funding of a further 1500 places in ATSI's Community Development Employment Projects scheme.

In short, a targeting on the basics, with almost three quarters of the Commonwealth's \$2.3 billion indigenous specific budget directly applied to the priority areas of housing, health, education and employment. Things that can change lives.

That being said, we all know, it's not simply a matter of spending more money.

We need to ensure funds are spent wisely and applied to those most in need.

We need to work with communities and individuals with local knowledge and a real understanding of how we can best make a difference.

The Round Table, comprising respected indigenous community leaders, hosted in October showed a commitment to cooperative effort and, in the years ahead, this type of approach will loom large in how we identify problem areas and address them. For instance, Senator Newman and Senator Herron announced on that occasion that \$20 million would be earmarked under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy to help strengthen indigenous communities, build self reliance and rebuild self respect.

The Round Table has been asked to advise the Government on how best to use these funds.

The COAG [Council of Australian Governments] meeting in November committed the Federal Government and all of the States and territories to collectively pursue new approaches - to invest in community leadership, to deliver practical measures that support families, children and young people, to tackle the symptoms of community dysfunction such as substance abuse and violence, and to forge greater links between the business sector and indigenous communities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in conclusion, we have come a long way in recent years.

In many ways, we are the envy of the world - rich in resources, rich in opportunity, united in our values and united in the hopes we hold for the future.

The way forward towards true reconciliation is surely to build upon this unity and the many areas of common agreement.

In this, as in other important national endeavours, the things that unite us are far stronger than those that divide us.

By working together, by sharing endeavour, and by sharing goals, I have no doubt we can all ultimately share success.