

## **ADDRESS AT THE NATIONAL RECONCILIATION PLANNING WORKSHOP<sup>1</sup>**

**PRIME MINISTER, THE HON. JOHN HOWARD M.P.**

As I reflected in the days leading up to this gathering as to what I might say I was conscious of a number of things. I was conscious primarily of the great opportunity that Reconciliation Australia had given me and given other political figures in Australia to share the aspirations of this gathering and to contribute some thoughts on the reconciliation process.

And I do want to thank Jackie and Mark and I want to pay tribute to them and the other people who have got this reconciliation workshop together. And one of the things that is impressive about this gathering was a fact commented upon by Jackie in her introduction when she drew attention to the presence at this gathering of several generations of Aboriginal leaders, exemplified by Patrick Dodson and Noel Pearson, but to be found in the presence of many others who in different ways have made a contribution to the process of reconciliation.

But in trying to encapsulate as I best I could the thoughts I had about reconciliation and being as I endeavour to be and as Jackie has certainly been in her introduction a realist about what can be achieved and what should be sought, I thought of an expression that I've used at many times during my prime ministership; it's not particularly original but it seems to me to fit many challenges that this country has and it certainly fits the challenges of reconciliation and that's my view that the things that unite us as Australians are greater and more enduring than the things that divide us. And that can certainly be said about reconciliation. There are differences, they've been well documented, they've been written about, some of them have, in the commentary, been quite literally done to death. But the things that unite us about reconciliation and where we all agree are far greater than the things on which we may disagree and the things that may divide us.

Reconciliation is about rights as well as responsibilities. It is about symbols as well as practical achievement. It is about the past as well as being about the present and the future. But what can we agree on undeniably? We can agree in the special status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander as the first people of our nation. We can recognise and acknowledge past injustices and I've frequently said in my time as Prime Minister that the treatment of indigenous Australians represents the most blemished chapter in the history of this country. We recognise that communal interest in and spiritual attachment to land is fundamental to indigenous culture. We certainly celebrate and share, as did one of our young presenters this morning, the blossoming of indigenous art and dance and the way it gives unique expression to Australian culture. We also believe that reconciliation should be about acknowledging those symbols

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we can all agree on. But I think we have to recognise that if all we do is focus on symbols we will have failed. If we focus simply on areas where we may not agree then we will have failed. Recognition of symbols needs to go hand-in-hand with practical action. It must harness our shared commitment to overcoming community disadvantage, dismantle the barriers that hinder indigenous Australians from sharing in the bounty that this great country has to offer, and of which our other young contributor spoke so eloquently just a few moments ago.

The journey towards reconciliation will only be complete when indigenous Australians enjoy the same opportunities as other Australians. And that frankly is going to take a very long time. And I think Jackie was absolutely right when she said that we do ourselves harm if we impose unrealistic time limits on what can be achieved.

I simply, along with I'm sure all of you, want an Australia where an Aboriginal child - whether born in a remote community or in one of our cities or in regional centres - can grow up and reach their full potential in life. I want that child to be loved and nurtured and morally guided, to be healthy, educated, optimistic, ambitious and to feel a full part of the Australian community. Economic opportunity and prosperity and social stability and cohesion; these goals I sometimes talk about [are] as relevant to our first citizens and to that Aboriginal child as to the rest of our society.

I am a realist and the work of reconciliation will be the work of generations. And it does require as Jackie again said a long-term commitment. But as well as being a realist I'm an optimist. I'm an optimist for three reasons - that I believe in the human spirit and I believe in the potential of individuals and of families and of communities not only in indigenous Australia, but all around our great country. I'm an optimist because I believe very much in the courage shown by many indigenous leaders; individuals with the courage to challenge conventional thinking, to promote economic opportunity, wealth creation and self-reliance; to assert the view that individual responsibility on the part of indigenous Australians is as much a part of the reconciliation process as is the discharge of government responsibilities in the name of the rest of the Australian community. That progress is about the acceptance of responsibilities as well as the assertion of rights.

And finally I'm an optimist because I believe in the essential decency, fairness and egalitarianism of the Australian people. It is not always on perfect display and there are some that do that notion shame. But fundamentally it is at the core of the way in which Australians live their lives. And the reason why the notion of reconciliation, however inadequately and differently expressed, has survived and how a gathering as representative of people who care about the future of the indigenous people of Australia as this gathering - the reason why it has come together is I believe a reflection of that innate decency fairness and egalitarianism.

If I can speak very bluntly, I think part of the problem with some earlier approaches to reconciliation was that it left too many people, particularly in white Australia, off the hook. It let them imagine that they could simply meet

their responsibilities by symbolic expressions and gesture rather than accepting the need for an ongoing persistent rendition of practical, on-the-ground measures to challenge the real areas of indigenous deprivation. Can I also stress, and it's been symbolised in a number of things the Government has done recently, that many of the challenges of passive welfare, which is certainly one of the key problems faced by indigenous communities, is also a challenge of other parts of the Australian community. Passive welfare is not just a problem for indigenous Australians. It's a problem for Australia generally and it's important that it be said at a gathering such as this, lest when people such as the Prime Minister speak of it, it is not mistakenly seen as some kind of singling out for a particular problem only affecting the indigenous people of this country.

Jackie Huggins has said that we have reached a new level of agreement in the reconciliation process on the 'fundamental need for change to be based on indigenous aspiration'. And as somebody who believes devoutly and passionately in individual aspiration as a driving force for progress and a driving force for progress in all sections in the Australian community, I want to see greater progress in relation to land.

We support very strongly the notion of indigenous Australians desiring to turn their land into wealth for the benefit of their families. We recognise the cultural importance of communal ownership of land, and we are committed to protecting the rights of communal ownership and to ensure that indigenous land is preserved for future generations.

And when I talk about land in this context let me make it clear that the Government does not seek to wind back or undermine native title or land rights. Rather we want to add opportunities for families and communities to build economic independence and wealth through use of their communal land assets. We want to find ways to help indigenous Australians secure, maximise and sustain economic benefits. We want to make native title and communal land work better. For most Australians home ownership is a means to build economic security and wealth for their families. As this gathering will know this is not the case for most indigenous Australians. Only 32 per cent of households with indigenous residents owned or were buying their own home, compared with 70 per cent for the rest of the community. Home ownership was just over eight per cent in very remote areas.

And when I visited the Thamarurr regional council in April they told me that they wanted more appropriate land ownership and leasing arrangements. They wanted public/private partnerships in building houses and the establishment of a private housing market in Wadeye. They wanted community members to be able to purchase and develop their own real estate, and I agreed with that. Those people are fortunate that they own their own land, but they are unfortunate given their inability to use its value for the benefits of families and communities.

Many others have expressed frustration that tangible and practical benefits have not flowed, as was expected from the granting of land rights. And the National Indigenous Council has raised the need for further exploration of

this issue and they are looking into this very issue themselves now. And expression in support of these concepts has been given by Warren Mundine, a member of the council, Joseph Elu, the chair of the Indigenous Business Australia, and also John Daley, the new chairman of the Northern Land Council. And as a result I've asked the Attorney General and the Minister for Indigenous Affairs to provide me with advice on how we can make existing arrangements deliver better housing and economic opportunities for indigenous Australians.

In the spirit of what I said at the beginning of my speech about the coming together both of the practical and the symbolic and of rights and responsibilities, you'll be aware of the emphasis that the Government has placed on Shared Responsibility Agreements. And these agreements seek to achieve goals, they seek to achieve practical outcomes, they seek to recognise where measured gains can be made on the basis of a shared commitment; a commitment from the Government in the name of the community and a commitment from the indigenous people. And we have now executed something in the order of over 50 of these Shared Responsibility Agreements. They may have been seen by some as a very modest step forward in the first place, they may even have been seen and criticised by some as an imperfect solution to local problems. But I think they encapsulate two very important concepts in tackling indigenous advantage.

They encapsulate the notion of a grass roots response. I don't want to be too critical about past structures and past approaches. I accept they were embraced in a spirit of optimism and in a spirit of goodwill, but I think one of the lessons we can learn from the past two decades of indigenous policy is that the solutions that focus on local communities and grass root responses are infinitely more likely to succeed than those that are imposed from a distant perspective and from above. And secondly and importantly, the Shared Responsibility Agreements encapsulate the notion of each part of the bargain, so to speak, discharging its responsibility. Governments have enormous responsibilities, governments command the resources of the nation and for all that I will properly talk and for all that many of this gathering will properly talk of the need for individual and personal responsibility by indigenous people (and of the need for parents to assert their authority over their children in an appropriate way, the need for local communities to accept responsibility for behaviour), for all of that I wouldn't want any to imagine that I do not see the government of this country, the governments of this country having enormous ongoing responsibilities to commit adequate resources to the tackling of the fundamental health and education and employment problems that face indigenous people. But Shared Responsibility Agreements at a local level express the notion of each part of the bargain, the indigenous community and the rest of the community discharging its responsibilities in order to achieve a satisfactory outcome.

Can I return before I conclude, Jackie, could I return to what I said at the beginning of my remarks that I'm delighted to have had the opportunity to come and address this gathering. I know many people in this room very well. In

the past we've had our differences of view. In the past there has been a sense in which dialogue between the Government and many of the leaders of the indigenous community has dwindled to almost to a point of non-existence.

I don't sense that today. I sense there is a spirit of hope and optimism about what can be achieved. I'm not going to talk about new dawns in reconciliation, we've had too many false dawns in the past and those approaches are always doomed to produce disappointment. But I do sense in the contacts that I've had, not only with Reconciliation Australia but the National Indigenous Council chaired by Sue Gordon and many other contacts I've had over the past year or two, I sense that there are new and real opportunities for progress. And they are opportunities based upon a recognition of the need to blend the symbolic with the practical and to mix rights and responsibilities. To accept that we're not always going to agree and to use that old expression there's a lot of wisdom on occasions to agree to disagree and then to get on and achieve progress in the areas where progress can be achieved.

I sense in the indigenous leadership of this country a recognition that the individual must assert a greater measure of personal responsibility if progress is to be made. I applaud that, I agree with it and I endorse it. But the concomitant of that is that the rest of the community must come half way.

The rest of the community has to reach out and meet the proper and enduring aspirations of indigenous people. To recognise, as I do and I believe the overwhelming majority of your fellow Australians do, that there is no section of our community which is more disadvantaged than the indigenous people of this country. It's a disadvantage found in areas of health, of employment, of education opportunities and social acceptance and respect. But although we have made progress in things such as school retention rates we still have a very long way to go in the area of educational opportunities. And although we've made progress in many health areas the gap between indigenous health outcomes and the health outcomes of the rest of the community is quite unacceptable, indeed quite appalling.

And that in recognising that a new spirit of responsibility is needed on an individual basis by Indigenous communities and that passive welfare is a poison for indigenous communities, as it is for the rest of the Australian community, I say in the name of the Government that we will reach out. We will meet the indigenous people of this country more than half way if necessary because at the end of the day we need together to achieve the very fine goals that have been articulated by Jackie.

Can I thank you again for inviting me. Can I again pay tribute to the work of those who lead Reconciliation Australia. I think it's a great organisation, it carries great responsibilities but I believe in the spirit of our time we should be optimistic about its goals.