



## Seventh Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

21 April 2008

### Opening Statement

**Statement by Mr Bernie Yates  
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(Check against delivery)

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Madame Chair, fellow delegates and guests,

First I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting.

I am honoured to be leading the Australian delegation to this 7<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and I would like to thank the Forum for this opportunity to speak about the theme of the Forum and the direction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy in Australia.

In November last year, Australia elected a new government with the Australian Labor Party coming to office after more than a decade in opposition.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has moved quickly to begin implementing his Government's key commitments. Among them are several measures particularly relevant to the deliberations of this Forum.

On 13 February, the Australian Parliament offered an apology to the Stolen Generations – the thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families and communities.

It was a remarkable day in our nation's history – acknowledging past injustices but just as importantly laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, described the Apology as directly benefiting all members of the Stolen Generations by validating their experiences and also by building a bridge between all Australians. I will have more to say on the Apology later.

First, I want to go to issues that directly relate to the Forum's theme.

On its first day in office, the Government ratified the Kyoto Protocol, a significant step in the fight against climate change at home and with the international community.

Australia is very vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Ours is a fragile environment of climatic extremes. Droughts and floods are a way of life for our farmers. But climate change poses a new and serious threat. Climate change threatens the survival of Great Barrier Reef, one of the wonders of the world, and the Kakadu wilderness.

With a population concentrated along our coastline, rising sea levels and extreme storms are a risk to the sustainability of coastal communities.

In our northernmost islands in the Torres Strait, as with our Pacific Island neighbours, there is a risk that people will become climate change refugees as their island homes become uninhabitable. This will be a key consideration in the design of our overseas aid program.

The Government wants to be more than part of the global problem of climate change – it's determined play an active role in the solution. After signing the Kyoto Protocol, Prime Minister Rudd attended the United Nations Climate Conference in Bali, where Australia was actively engaged in the launch of a two year negotiation on Kyoto post 2012.

Domestically, the Government is committed to a target of a 60 per cent reduction in emissions by 2050.

One of the Government's strategies is to assist one of the countries largest land holder groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to take advantage of carbon trading through abatement enterprise.

Hundreds of new ranger positions will be created to work on protecting biodiversity in Indigenous lands and waters.

I return now to the Apology.

On the first day of the new Parliament, the Prime Minister delivered a motion of apology.

In a speech broadcast live around the country, Mr Rudd apologised for the grief and loss inflicted on all Indigenous people by the policies of successive governments.

He said

*"To the Stolen Generations I say the following: As Prime Minister of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Government of Australia, I am sorry. On behalf of the Parliament of Australia, I am sorry. And I offer you this apology without qualification. We apologise for the hurt, the pain and the suffering we, the parliament, have caused you by the laws that previous parliaments have enacted. We apologise for the indignity, the*

*degradation and the humiliation these laws embodied. We offer this apology to the mothers, the fathers, the brothers, the sisters, the families and the communities whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments under successive parliaments”.*

Mr Rudd spoke of the need for reconciliation:

*“There comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time. And that is why the parliament is today here assembled: to deal with this unfinished business of the nation, to remove a great stain from the nation’s soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia.”*

The Prime Minister said through the apology we could build a bridge of respect – a new relationship characterised by mutual respect and mutual responsibility.

And he set specific targets:

- To close the gap in Indigenous life expectancy within a generation
- To halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- To halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade
- To halve the gap in employment outcomes within a decade, and
- To give all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities access to pre-school within five years.

All State and Territory governments have signed up to the same targets and the Prime Minister will deliver a progress report at the start of every parliamentary year.

Mr Rudd also announced the formation of a bipartisan Joint Policy Commission led by himself and the Leader of the Opposition. Its first task is the development and implementation of an effective housing strategy for remote communities over the next five years.

Central to the Government’s approach is building working partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

As our Minister for Indigenous Affairs, the Honourable Jenny Macklin, said recently: “... solutions can’t be imposed on people... To work and be sustainable, the solutions have to be developed on the ground and driven by the communities that own them”.

The Government is committed to the emergency response in the Northern Territory to protect Indigenous children from the shocking levels of abuse and neglect reported in *the Little Children Are Sacred* Report.

A comprehensive, independent review of the Northern Territory emergency response will be undertaken at the 12 month mark, and will start in the middle of the year. This will identify what is effective and what needs to be changed or strengthened.

The new Government recognises the importance of the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples globally.

Our national apology heralds a new relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples based on respect, co-operation and mutual responsibility.

As is normal practice on international instruments, detailed consultations are currently being undertaken with Australia's State and Territory governments as well as with Indigenous organisations and other key stakeholders on the Declaration.

In closing, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and leave you with the words of the Prime Minister of Australia on the prospects for reconciliation:

*"... we embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are blessed, truly blessed, to have among us. Cultures that provide a unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our planet. And growing from this new respect, to see our Indigenous brothers and sisters with fresh eyes, with new eyes, and with our minds wide open as to how we might tackle, together, the great practical challenges that Indigenous Australia faces in the future."*