



AUSTRALIA

UNITED NATIONS
SUB-COMMISSION ON
PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION
AND PROTECTION OF MINORITIES.

WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS
POPULATIONS - EIGHTH SESSION.

STATEMENT BY THE HON. ROBERT TICKNER MP

MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS
ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

ITEM 5 : REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS PERTAINING TO THE
PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND
FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS OF INDIGENOUS
POPULATIONS.

GENEVA
30 JULY 1990.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY.

AUSTRALIAN PERMANENT MISSION
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MADAM CHAIRMAN, DISTINGUISHED MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND YOUR REPRESENTATIVES, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

MAY I FIRST EXPRESS ON BEHALF OF THE AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION, MADAM CHAIRMAN, MY CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR RE-ELECTION AS CHAIRMAN-RAPPORTEUR OF THE WORKING GROUP. WE HAVE FULL CONFIDENCE IN YOUR ABILITY AND THE ABILITIES OF OTHER MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP TO CARRY OUT YOUR IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITIES.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, IT IS A GREAT HONOUR FOR ME TO ADDRESS THIS EIGHTH MEETING OF THE WORKING GROUP AS THE MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS IN AUSTRALIA. I AM INTENSELY AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS FORUM TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.

PRIOR TO MY ELECTION TO THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT, I WORKED AS A LAWYER WITH THE ABORIGINAL LEGAL SERVICE FOR 6 YEARS AND WAS PRIVILEGED TO BE ABLE TO SERVE AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN THEIR JUST CAUSE AND GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR CONTINUING CALL FOR SELF-DETERMINATION.

I APPEAR HERE TODAY AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT TO REPORT ON DEVELOPMENTS IN AUSTRALIA DURING THE PAST 12 MONTHS IN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS.

I WOULD LIKE TO EXPRESS AT THE OUTSET THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S CONTINUED SUPPORT FOR THE WORKING GROUP AND STRESS OUR STRONGLY HELD VIEW THAT THE WORKING GROUP MUST BE ADEQUATELY RESOURCED, AND IN PARTICULAR THAT TRANSLATION SERVICES MUST BE PROVIDED TO ALLOW NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO MAKE AN EFFECTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORKING GROUP. AUSTRALIA WILL STRONGLY SUPPORT THIS VIEW AT THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION.

AS FEDERAL MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS, I RECOGNISE THAT THE WORLD IS WATCHING AUSTRALIA AND THAT NATIONS ARE AWARE THAT AUSTRALIA'S ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE STILL SUFFER CONTINUING DISADVANTAGE AND INJUSTICE WHICH MUST BE ADDRESSED. THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS CONTINUING TO WORK TO ADDRESS THOSE CONCERNS.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT RECOGNISES THAT OUR POLICIES AND THOSE OF OTHER GOVERNMENTS IN THEIR DEALINGS WITH THEIR INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS WILL REMAIN IN THE INTERNATIONAL SPOTLIGHT AND OUGHT PROPERLY TO REMAIN SO.

AUSTRALIA ALSO PLACE GREAT IMPORTANCE ON THE STANDARD SETTING ACTIVITIES OF THE WORKING GROUP AND WOULD ENCOURAGE ALL GOVERNMENTS TO TAKE A GREATER INTEREST IN AND FURTHER SUPPORT THESE PROCESSES.

MADAM CHAIR, THERE HAVE BEEN IMPORTANT ADVANCES IN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS POLICIES IN AUSTRALIA OVER THE PAST 12 MONTHS. SOME OF THESE REFORMS HAVE ALREADY BEEN REFERRED TO BY THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE NEWLY CREATED ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMISSION, MISS LOIS O'DONOGHUE, IN HER EARLIER CONTRIBUTION TO THIS PLENARY SESSION.

SUCCESSIVE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES AT THIS FORUM HAVE STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRINCIPLE OF SELF-DETERMINATION FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA AND FOR AUSTRALIA'S OTHER INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, THE TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS. AUSTRALIA'S REPRESENTATIVE HERE LAST YEAR, MR BILL GRAY, STRESSED THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF SELF-DETERMINATION WAS THE FORCE BEHIND THE PROPOSED ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMISSION. THAT COMMISSION CAME INTO EXISTENCE ON MARCH 5TH THIS YEAR. THROUGH THIS NATIONAL BODY, COMPOSED OF ALMOST ENTIRELY ELECTED ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE, THERE WILL BE AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY FOR AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TO DETERMINE AND SHAPE POLICY AND TO PLAN DEVELOPMENT BASED ON THE NEEDS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

I SHOULD POINT OUT THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ATSIC FOLLOWED THE MOST EXTENSIVE CONSULTATION PROGRAM EVER UNDERTAKEN WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA.

UNDER ATSIC, 60 REGIONAL COUNCILS ACROSS AUSTRALIA WILL BE DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED BY ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE. THE FIRST ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD ON NOVEMBER 3RD THIS YEAR. THESE COUNCILS WILL DETERMINE LOCAL FUNDING PRIORITIES BASED ON THEIR OWN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN.

THE COUNCILS WILL IN TURN ELECT 17 OF THE 20 ATSIC COMMISSIONERS. THE REMAINING THREE WILL BE APPOINTED BY GOVERNMENT. UNTIL THE ELECTIONS ARE HELD ATSIC IS BEING RUN BY FIVE ABORIGINAL COMMISSIONERS APPOINTED BY THE GOVERNMENT, WITH THE CHAIR BEING MISS LOIS O'DONOGHUE.

THE ATSIC LEGISLATION IS INTENDED TO ENSURE THAT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR DETERMINING THEIR OWN PRIORITIES AND IMPLEMENTING SPECIAL PROGRAMS OF ASSISTANCE. SUCH A TREND TO DIRECT INVOLVEMENT IS VERY MUCH IN KEEPING WITH THE DIRECTION OF THE DRAFT DECLARATION ON INDIGENOUS RIGHTS.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT I EMPHASISE THAT THE CREATION OF THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMISSION IS NOT INTENDED SIMPLY TO CHANGE THE NAME OF THE ORGANISATION WHICH IMPLEMENTS PROGRAMS FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE. THE NEW LEGISLATION BRINGS ABOUT A SUBSTANTIAL NEW DIRECTION IN WHICH THE DECISION-MAKING POWER IN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS IS VESTED IN THE ELECTED COMMISSIONERS ACCOUNTABLE DOWNWARDS TO REGIONAL COUNCILS AND TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES. ADDITIONALLY THE NEW COMMISSION ESTABLISHES NEW AND HIGHER STANDARDS OF FINANCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY.

I MUST REPORT TO YOU THAT THE LEGISLATION TO ESTABLISH THE NEW COMMISSION DID NOT HAVE AN EASY PASSAGE THROUGH THE PARLIAMENT AND WAS FINALLY PASSED BECAUSE OF THE COMMITMENT AND DETERMINATION OF THE FORMER MINISTER, MR GERRY HAND.

I AM PLEASED TO REPORT, HOWEVER, THAT SINCE THE NEW COMMISSION CAME INTO EXISTENCE THE OPPOSITION IN THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HAS GIVEN SUPPORT TO THE NEW BODY AND THE SHADOW MINISTER, DR MICHAEL WOOLDRIDGE, HAS INDICATED A PREPAREDNESS TO ESTABLISH A GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NEW COMMISSION.

AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT I DO NOT COME TO THIS UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP ATTEMPTING TO PERSUADE YOU THAT ALL INDIGENOUS CONCERNS HAVE BEEN ADDRESSED. CLEARLY THEY HAVE NOT AND IT IS WIDELY ACKNOWLEDGED IN AUSTRALIA ACROSS THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM AND BY THE CHURCHES THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE CONTINUE TO SUFFER EXTREME DISADVANTAGE COMPARED WITH OTHER AUSTRALIANS.

ONE OF MY MAIN OBJECTIVES AS MINISTER IS TO DEVELOP A NATIONAL COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS THAT DISADVANTAGE RECOGNISING THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE THEMSELVES ARE BEST ABLE TO RESOLVE ABORIGINAL CONCERNS.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER HEALTH IS ONE SUCH AREA OF EXTREME DISADVANTAGE. STATISTICS SHOW THAT DISEASE RATES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE ARE SIGNIFICANTLY WORSE THAN FOR OTHER AUSTRALIANS WITH HEALTH RATES FOUR TIMES HIGHER AND LIFE EXPECTANCY UP TO 22 YEARS LESS.

TWO MONTHS AGO A MEETING OF COMMONWEALTH AND STATE AND TERRITORY MINISTERS FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS AND HEALTH ADOPTED A NATIONAL ABORIGINAL HEALTH STRATEGY.

A CORNERSTONE OF THE STRATEGY WILL BE THE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN THE FORMULATION OF HEALTH POLICY THROUGH A NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ABORIGINAL HEALTH WHICH WILL INCLUDE GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATION BUT WITH THE MAJORITY OF MEMBERS BEING ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE REPRESENTING COMMUNITY-BASED ABORIGINAL HEALTH ORGANISATIONS.

THE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL HEALTH STRATEGY RECOGNISES THAT SUCH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY-BASED HEALTH ORGANISATIONS PLAY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN THE FORMULATION OF ABORIGINAL HEALTH POLICY.

IT IS UNQUESTIONABLE THAT MANY ABORIGINAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ARISE FROM APPALLING LIVING CONDITIONS AND FOR THIS REASON THE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL HEALTH STRATEGY PLACES A HIGH PRIORITY ON ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ISSUES. IF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE CONTINUE TO LACK ADEQUATE HOUSING, WATER SUPPLY, SEWERAGE DISPOSAL AND OTHER BASIC FACILITIES WHICH OTHER AUSTRALIANS TAKE FOR GRANTED THEN THEY WILL CONTINUE TO HAVE THE WORST STANDARD OF HEALTH IN AUSTRALIA.

ONLY A CONCENTRATED AND ONGOING COMMITMENT TO TACKLE THESE ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ISSUES BY NATIONAL, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN CONJUNCTION WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WILL BE EFFECTIVE.

IN PREVIOUS ADDRESSES TO THE WORKING GROUP, LEADERS OF THE AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION HAVE REFERRED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A ROYAL COMMISSION INTO ABORIGINAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION IS EXAMINING THE CAUSES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DEATHS IN POLICE AND PRISON CUSTODY FROM 1980 UNTIL JUNE 1989. UNDER ITS TERMS OF REFERENCE THE COMMISSION IS ALSO EXAMINING THE UNDERLYING ISSUES WHICH APPEAR TO HAVE A BEARING UPON THE DEATHS.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS LIES MAINLY WITH THE STATE AND TERRITORY GOVERNMENTS. THE ROYAL COMMISSION THEREFORE IS A JOINT STATE AND FEDERAL UNDERTAKING.

IN DECEMBER 1988 THE ROYAL COMMISSION SUBMITTED AN INTERIM REPORT WHICH MAKES A RANGE OF RECOMMENDATIONS AIMED AT REDUCING THE RATES OF DETENTION AND IMPROVING THE CARE AND SAFETY OF PERSONS IN CUSTODY. THE COMMISSION'S FINAL REPORT IS DUE AT THE END OF THIS YEAR, AND IS EXPECTED TO INFLUENCE POLICY THINKING FOR MANY YEARS.

DEATHS IN CUSTODY IS A DEEPLY DISTURBING ISSUE FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS AND THE FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION MUST BE GIVEN PRIORITY CONSIDERATION BY GOVERNMENTS AT ALL LEVELS AND APPROPRIATE ACTION TAKEN BY ALL GOVERNMENTS ON THOSE RECOMMENDATIONS.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT IS AWARE THAT THIS UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP, AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS WILL BE MONITORING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ALL RECOMMENDATIONS.

A FURTHER DEVELOPMENT IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS HAS BEEN THE LAUNCH OF THE NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION POLICY BY THE MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING, JOHN DAWKINS, MP. THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY HAS FOUR MAIN PURPOSES:

1. TO ENSURE ABORIGINAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING
2. TO PROVIDE EQUALITY OF ACCESS FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO EDUCATION SERVICES
3. TO RAISE THE RATES OF ABORIGINAL PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION TO THOSE FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS, AND
4. TO ACHIEVE EQUITABLE AND APPROPRIATE OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE.

THE STATES AND TERRITORIES AND THE COMMONWEALTH HAVE AGREED TO IMPLEMENT THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY THROUGH COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENTS COVERING EDUCATIONAL PLANNING, FINANCIAL RESOURCING, AND MONITORING AND REPORTING OF PROGRESS TOWARDS THE ATTAINMENT OF THE 21 GOALS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY.

IN MY CONTRIBUTION TO THIS WORKING GROUP I DO NOT PROPOSE TO CANVASS EXHAUSTIVELY ALL ASPECTS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS POLICIES BUT TO FOCUS ON MAJOR NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND ON AREAS OF PUBLIC INTEREST AND ATTENTION.

THE ISSUE OF THE RETURN OF SKELETAL REMAINS HAS BEEN AN IMPORTANT ISSUE TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND INITIATIVES HAVE ALREADY BEEN TAKEN TO SECURE THE RETURN OF SUCH REMAINS.

IN FEBRUARY THIS YEAR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS MINISTERS FROM THE COMMONWEALTH STATES AND TERRITORIES AGREED TO DEVELOP A NATIONAL POSITION AND STRATEGY FOR THE RETURN TO AUSTRALIA OF SIGNIFICANT ABORIGINAL CULTURAL MATERIAL, PARTICULARLY SKELETAL MATERIAL FROM OVERSEAS COLLECTIONS.

AS THE FEDERAL MINISTER, IT IS MY VIEW THAT FURTHER INITIATIVES CAN BE CONSTRUCTIVELY UNDERTAKEN IN CONSULTATION WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO SECURE THE RETURN OF SKELETAL REMAINS AND I WILL BE MAKING A PUBLIC STATEMENT ON THIS ISSUE SOON AFTER MY RETURN TO AUSTRALIA.

A FURTHER MAJOR ISSUE OF CONCERN TO ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA IS THE PROPOSAL FOR A SPACEPORT AND OTHER DEVELOPMENTS ON CAPE YORK PENINSULA IN FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND.

DETAILED PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF CAPE YORK IS CURRENTLY PROCEEDING AND THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT HAVE STATED THAT ABORIGINAL CONCERNS MUST BE ADDRESSED IN RELATION TO THE SPACEPORT ISSUE. AT THE PRESENT TIME, DESPITE THE FACT THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE FORM A MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION OF CAPE YORK, THEY HAVE ALMOST NO CONTROL OVER LAND USE PLANNING DECISIONS AS A RESULT OF THE POLICIES OF THE FORMER QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT. CLEARLY CAPE YORK WILL PROVIDE A FOCUS OF THE COMMITMENT OF THE NEWLY ELECTED QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT TO INVOLVE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND TO PROMOTE ABORIGINAL INTERESTS.

APPROVAL FOR THE SPACEPORT WOULD CLEARLY HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT OF CAPE YORK. THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT ALSO HAS A VITAL CONTINUING ROLE IN THIS ISSUE AND IS COMMITTED TO SEEING THAT THE RIGHTS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ARE RESPECTED AND TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT.

HAVING BEEN APPOINTED MINISTER FOR ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS IN APRIL THIS YEAR, ONE GOAL I WAS DETERMINED TO ADDRESS URGENTLY WAS THAT OF PROMOTING A MORE FAVOURABLE POLITICAL CLIMATE FOR ADDRESSING THE CRITICAL ISSUES CONFRONTING ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS.

WITHOUT APPORTIONING BLAME OR MAKING RECRIMINATIONS IT IS TRUE TO SAY THAT RECENT YEARS IN AUSTRALIA HAVE WITNESSED DEEP PARTY POLITICAL DIFFERENCES OVER ABORIGINAL ISSUES AND THAT THE BIG LOSERS AS A RESULT OF THOSE DECISIONS HAVE BEEN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE THEMSELVES. IN PARTICULAR THE ACQUISITION BY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE OF THEIR TRADITIONAL LANDS HAS BEEN RETARDED AND PROGRESS TOWARDS ANY RECONCILIATION BETWEEN AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE WIDER COMMUNITY HAS BEEN STOPPED DEAD IN ITS TRACKS.

THE PROPOSAL FOR A TREATY OR COMPACT RAISED IN GOOD FAITH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, MR HAWKE, A PERSON DEEPLY COMMITTED TO THE CAUSE OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, WAS MET WITH STRONG OPPOSITION AND EVEN HOSTILITY TO THE CONCEPT. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, IN RECENT MONTHS SOME WONDERFUL SIGNS OF HOPE THAT GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION MAY BE ABLE TO WORK TOGETHER TO PROMOTE A PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION BY WHICH NON-ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS MAY BE ABLE TO COME TO TERMS HONESTLY WITH THE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, THIS FORUM PLAYS A VITAL ROLE ON THE WORLD STAGE IN EDUCATING GOVERNMENTS ABOUT THE ASPIRATIONS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE. IT IS MY VIEW THAT A PROCESS OF EDUCATION AND RECONCILIATION MUST BE ESTABLISHED WITHIN AUSTRALIA WHICH WILL ASSIST NON-ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO HAVE A GREATER LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF ABORIGINAL HISTORY, CULTURE, DISPOSSESSION AND CONTINUING DISADVANTAGE AND WHAT IS NEEDED TO ADEQUATELY ADDRESS THOSE ISSUES FROM AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE.

I BELIEVE THAT THERE IS A CONSENSUS ON THE NEED FOR SUCH A PROCESS TO BE ESTABLISHED WITHIN AUSTRALIA AND THAT ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WILL JOIN WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION TO SUPPORT SUCH A PROCESS. A PRECONDITION OF ANY RECONCILIATION MUST BE THE ADOPTION OF A NATIONAL GOAL FOR ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT WORKING WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO ADDRESS COOPERATIVELY ISSUES OF LAND, HOUSING, HEALTH, INFRASTRUCTURE, EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA IN THE PERIOD LEADING UP TO THE CENTENARY OF FEDERATION IN 2001.

IMPORTANTLY, THE OPPOSITION IN THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT AND A NUMBER OF THE PROMINENT MEMBERS OF OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES INCLUDING PREMIER GREINER IN NEW SOUTH WALES AND OPPOSITION LEADER RUSSELL COOPER IN QUEENSLAND HAVE AGREED

TO WORK WITH THE GOVERNMENT IN A BIPARTISAN WAY IN SUPPORT OF A PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION. IT WILL BE MY RESPONSIBILITY TO WORK WITH THE PRIME MINISTER TO DEVISE A SPECIFIC PROCESS FOR THAT RECONCILIATION.

AS A NATION WE ARE IN A UNIQUE AND CRITICAL TIME TO BEGIN SUCH A PROCESS. I CAN CONFIDENTLY FORECAST AN ERA OF GREAT PROGRESS IN ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS WITH BOTH GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION BEING PREPARED TO WORK TOGETHER IN A BIPARTISAN MANNER TO BUILD BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING WITH ABORIGINAL PEOPLE.

AS A NATION AUSTRALIA HAS SQUANDERED THE OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED BY THE BICENTENARY TO ESTABLISH A PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION. AS WE MOVE TOWARDS THE CENTURY OF AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN 2001 AND LED BY A PRIME MINISTER WITH A DEEP PERSONAL AND POLITICAL CONVICTION TO ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA WE HAVE AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY TO INITIATE SUCH A PROCESS.

IMPORTANTLY THE OPPOSITION HAS NOT RULED OUT A DOCUMENT AS A FINAL OUTCOME OF THE PROCESS OF RECONCILIATION. THEY REMAIN TO BE CONVINCED ON THAT QUESTION AND I ISSUE THIS PLEA TO THEM TO KEEP THEIR OPTIONS OPEN.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE WILL ALSO NO DOUBT KEEP THEIR OPTIONS OPEN AND IF ANY DOCUMENT IS TO BE ENTERED INTO THEY WILL RIGHTLY INSIST ON EXTENSIVE CONSULTATIONS AND AN INDICATION OF THEIR CLEARLY EXPRESSED INFORMED AGREEMENT TO SUCH A DOCUMENT.

THE PRIME MINISTER HAS REFERRED TO THE DOCUMENT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF RECONCILIATION. HOWEVER OVER TIME DIFFERENT NAMES HAVE BEEN USED INCLUDING MAKARATA COMPACT AND TREATY.

MY STRONGLY HELD VIEW IS THAT ATTENTION MUST BE FOCUSED AT THIS TIME NOT ON THE NAME OF SOME DOCUMENT WHICH IS AN OPTION AT THE END OF AN EXTENSIVE RECONCILIATION PROCESS BUT INSTEAD WE OUGHT TO FOCUS ON THE PROCESS ITSELF AS THE PROCESS IS AS IMPORTANT AS THE FINAL OUTCOME.

ALL SECTIONS OF THE NON-ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY MUST BE INVOLVED IN THAT PROCESS AS WELL AS ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE. GOVERNMENTS AT ALL LEVELS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY AS DO THE CHURCHES, BUSINESS, TRADE UNIONS, EDUCATORS, THE MEDIA, THE ARTS COMMUNITY, AND OTHER COMMUNITY LEADERS.

IT IS ABSOLUTELY VITAL THAT ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN THIS PROCESS. IT IS A PROCESS WHICH INVOLVES THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF AUSTRALIA AND NON-ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS.

MADAM CHAIRMAN, I HAVE BEEN VERY FRANK IN MY REPORTING OF DEVELOPMENTS. AUSTRALIA BELIEVES THAT ALL COUNTRIES WILL BE JUDGED AND MUST BE JUDGED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY ON THEIR HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD AND WHERE RELEVANT ON THEIR TREATMENT OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE.

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WILL CONTINUE TO PROMOTE THIS PRINCIPLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND WE APPLY NO LESSER STANDARD TO OUR OWN CONDUCT AS A NATION.

I THANK YOU ALL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO ADDRESS THE WORKING GROUP.