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WELCOME TO WORLD COUNCIL of CHURCHES *

First of all I would like to extend to you all a warm
welcome to Canberra. For the next ten days the focus of the
Christian world will be on this Assembly.

Aboriginal and Islander Christians have played a prominent
and active part in the planning of this Assembly and the
participation of our people in all aspects of the program will
be critical for the success of this meeting. I would like to
take this opportunity to congratulate the Aboriginal & Islander
Commission of the Australian Council of Churches for the
considerable effort they have put into this conference.

The relationship between the various European Christian Churches
and the indigenous people of this country has been long and
at times a painful one. I do not wish to dwell on the negative
and often destructive impact of past Churches' role in the
suppression of Aboriginal spirituality and culture. But we welcome
the profound changes that have taken place, and are still
taking place in the Christian Community. These changes have
led to a remarkable affirmation of the unique contribution
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are making to a
now more enriched Christian presence on this continent.

It took the churches a long time to come to terms with our
culture and spirituality. You must remember that for thousands
of years, long before the birth of Christianity, Aboriginal
people were free to grow without the interference of people
from other places.

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- * Welcome speech delivered by Miss Lois O'Donoghue Chairperson
of ATSIC to the opening session Seventh Assembly, World Council
of Churches, Canberra, on February 7th, 1991. (Abridged)

We lived in spiritual closeness to the land... in harmony with its animals, rivers and mountains. Our spiritual traditions developed over a long period; therefore we have much to offer.

We do appreciate the contributions made by various Church groups and people to our struggle for our land and recognition, and for basic human rights - for our struggle for our land.

Let us hope that criticism that is not constructive, but often negative, does not inhibit our determination to go forward with the changes that have taken place and are taking place at this time.

I would urge that during your deliberations over the next ten days you might see ways that the christian community can build upon the changes that are taking place; and might suggest processes that would complement and support the progress already being made.

Self-determination, based on self-sufficiency, is what indigenous people in this country are working towards.

The establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission - or ATSIC - is an indication of the commitment to this concept by government.

ATSIC was established by legislation passed by the Australian Parliament in November 1989. It came into being in March of 1990 replacing - The Department of Aboriginal Affairs and The Aboriginal Development Commission. ATSIC is a representative organisation with the representative arm made up entirely of indigenous Australians - all of them elected as a result of a formal election process.

Sixty Regional Councils, which are the cornerstone of the organisation, are in place across Australia to advise on priorities, needs and funds allocation. By early March (1991) Regional Councils will have elected 17 Commissioners who together with three appointed Commissioners - including me as Chairperson - will comprise the Board of Commissioners of ATSIC.

The establishment of ATSIC resulted in indigenous people for the first time being empowered to make decisions about policies that affect them. Its establishment has brought about a major change in the way Aboriginal affairs are administered. We know there is considerable international interest in what we are doing.

Change is taking place and the pace is quickening. We are now seeing a new direction in Aboriginal affairs. And nowhere is that direction better embodied than in the the recommendations of the recent Report of The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal affairs titled " Our Country Our Selves ".

