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MEDIA RELEASE

Constitutional recognition of Indigenous rights long overdue

Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) said tonight it would welcome constitutional change that enshrines the distinctive rights of the first Australians, but the wording of any preamble would need to be developed on the basis of genuine negotiations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said that the Prime Minister would need to demonstrate that he is sincere about reconciliation in order to achieve support for the proposal he announced this evening - to recognise Indigenous Australians in the Constitution.

"The Prime Minister's announcement is surprising given his recent vehement opposition to the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples," Mr Highland said.

"There's an understandable suspicion of Mr Howard's motives given his 11 years of hostility towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."

Mr Highland said the Prime Minister's acknowledgement that he has often "struggled" with the issue of reconciliation was a welcome but long overdue admission of his own failed responsibilities in the area of Indigenous policy.

"Mr Howard will need to make his own peace with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if he's to have any hope of making peace on behalf of the nation," he said.

Mr Highland said the Prime Minister's continued failure to apologise to the Stolen Generations would be a barrier to winning the trust of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

"It's disappointing that Mr Howard continued to distort the calls for an apology in tonight's speech."

"The demand for an apology is not over the broad sweep of Australian history as Mr Howard would try to have us believe, but in response to the specific actions of Government in relation to child removal."

Mr Highland said the Prime Minister was unusually candid in his comment that: "The challenge I have faced around indigenous identity politics is in part an artefact of who I am and the time in which I grew up."

"It's ironic that this touching admission also emphasises the Prime Minister's remoteness from the aspirations of modern Australia," Mr Highland said.

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