
Rare smile breaks traditional routine

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WHAT a great pleasure it was to see the normally snarling Noel Pearson smile with genuine pleasure after the Howard-Harradine native title compromise on television this week.

Why wouldn't you smile when you could declare, as Pearson triumphantly did on ABC-TV minutes after the Wik compromise was announced, what he described as a 4-0 penalty shoot-out victory to the Aboriginal cause _ a most apt description in view of the World Cup, I might add.

I didn't keep an actual score on the compromise but it surprised me that anyone, particularly Pearson, would claim victory out of such a deal . . . but not for the reasons you may think.

You see, in any battle for perceived rights, particularly where they concern money, power or property, you never smile, you never show satisfaction at the outcome no matter how acceptable it may be.

When you have taken the fight to the limit of your resources and, more importantly, when you've pushed your luck almost beyond endurance, you grudgingly accept the umpire's decision, tell the world what a rotten hand you've been dealt and wander dejected into the sunset to lick your wounds.

Then, out of sight to all but your own, you gather your mates around, pat yourselves on the back, have a great old laugh at the opposition's expense and raise a glass or two to sweet, sweet victory.

It's the lore of Western civilisation. Bosses do it to workers and workers do it to bosses. Husbands do it to wives and vice versa. Lawyers do it to lawyers. It makes the world go round.

Yet all the usual Aboriginal spokesmen got the plot right that night but the one you'd most expect to be at the coalface of despair, Noel Pearson .

While Pearson was claiming his shoot-out victory, one of his Aboriginal colleagues was claiming it meant nothing less than an end to reconciliation as we know it.

Our own Sugar Ray Robinson forgot his concerns with the looming audit of his Aboriginal legal services long enough to say the Wik compromise meant ``we're finished''. The Aboriginal race gone. Kaput!

And what was Pearson doing? Smiling unaccustomedly and claiming a 4-0 victory on national television. Absolutely amazing!

But wait! Something happened overnight to change his smile back to that snarl we have come to know and expect, for next morning he said he had got it all wrong the night before.

The 4-0 victory had somehow turned into a crushing defeat overnight and this was despite his good mate and confidant, the whitefella Jesuit priest Frank Brennan, still declaring the compromise ``music to his ears".

How had he got it so wrong, then? Well, explained Pearson, the rotten whitefellas had kept the blackfellas out of the negotiation process, is what, and hadn't given him a proper chance to weigh up all the pros and cons when he appeared on TV the night before.

Unfortunately that was not entirely true, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Minister John Herron pointed out in the Senate next day, Thursday.

Said Herron: `` . . . it was the Indigenous Working Group's own decision to withdraw from direct discussions with the Government in May last year but, even so, technical discussions at the official level with the group's legal advisers have continued . . ."

So it was an Aboriginal decision to walk away from the compromise discussions involving the Government and Senator Harradine, eh? But even then they had direct access to those discussions through their own legal advisers.

Yet here was the usually snarling but astute lawyer Pearson on national television not only smiling but claiming a 4-nil victory for a deal that appeared a nil-all draw at best.

Then again it is a deal that does not differ greatly from that proposed by the Keating government back in 1993 and which was generally accepted by Aboriginal people at the time, including Pearson, according to the Howard Government but now denied by Pearson.

IS IT possible that Pearson somehow forgot the widely accepted plot in the negotiation process I spelt out above, and instead of hiding his smile until he was out of sight and among friends, let his satisfaction show? Was he counselled about this oversight by his Aboriginal peers overnight?

Personally I don't think it's a victory either way, certainly not for the taxpayer who will be footing the bill for all the compensation that will follow all the legal action for years to come for which we, the taxpayer, will also pay.

All I hope is that in the end justice is done for those deserving Aborigines who have genuine claims to land and compensation. They justly deserve it. Similarly, justice also must be done in the case of all the vexatious and frivolous claims that have been and will be made by extremely greedy people to the taxpayers' great cost.

I also hope something can be done in the very near future to prevent a repeat of today's federal political situation in which a government which came to office with such a clear mandate as Howard's can see that mandate so diminished as to be forced into negotiations with one Independent senator.

Does it make sense that a government of 94 originally elected House of Representatives members, put there on the votes of 5,142,161 Australians, can be stymied by one man with a shaky vote in Tasmania?

No offence to Tasmanians, mind. The situation would be just as ludicrous if it was one mighty Queenslander . . . even The King himself, Mr Wally Lewis, say.