
Pearson keen to work with Latham

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ABORIGINAL leader Noel Pearson is encouraged by Mark Latham's election as Labor leader, hoping it leads to broader support for efforts in Cape York to tackle alcoholism and welfare dependence in indigenous communities.

"He was the one guy in parliament making speeches, talking to people and endorsing what we were doing," Mr Pearson said.

Since visiting indigenous communities with Mr Pearson two years ago, Mr Latham has been forthright in his support for the Pearson approach of restricting access to alcohol in Aboriginal communities and moving away from passive welfare. Other Labor MPs have been more sceptical and Mr Pearson has attracted criticism for being prepared to diminish indigenous rights and push a right-wing agenda.

Aboriginal elder statesman Patrick Dodson described the approach as "a very virulent form of assimilation".

Mr Pearson said Labor had the opportunity to bring together a comprehensive agenda of rights and responsibilities in indigenous affairs, embracing stronger support for land rights, welfare reform, intolerance of substance abuse and environmental preservation.

Queensland Premier Peter Beattie had provided the momentum for tackling problems through Cape York Partnerships, a joint project between the state Government and Cape York communities. The Queensland Government legislated for alcohol management plans which are being implemented.

"We have had very good support from a Labor premier from the beginning," Mr Pearson said. "That's why I can't understand federal Labor's reluctance. Labor has to decide whether indigenous policy is the toilet cleaner on the Titanic in terms of politics."

"The questions involved have a wider significance, because from Cape York to Campbelltown (in Mr Latham's electorate) this is really about how people who have been disengaged from economic life, who are suffering from social problems, start climbing the so-called ladders of opportunity."

Mr Pearson identified as the other politician whom the Cape York indigenous community had worked with most closely as Health Minister Tony Abbott -- Mr Latham's No 1 enemy.