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## **Pearson backs Howard's approach to Indigenous affairs**

Barrie Cassidy speaks to the director of the Cape York Policy Institute, Noel Pearson, about Prime Minister John Howard's approach to Indigenous affairs and reconciliation. Mr Pearson says "the Prime Minister has affirmed very clearly that symbols and practical reconciliation ... both must occur".

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** What a stop start process reconciliation is proving to be in this country. In 1991 the Parliament passed an act allowing for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It was to be a 10-year process. That was 14 years ago. So these days timetables and ambitions are more modest. During the week Canberra hosted a workshop aimed at setting in place a major conference on reconciliation for 2007. Well, what did we learn from the week. In a moment our program guest Noel Pearson, director of the Cape York Policy Institute. First, here is part of what the Prime Minister had to say in his speech on Monday.

**JOHN HOWARD:** Reconciliation is about rights, as well as responsibilities. It is about symbols, as well as practical achievement. If I can speak very bluntly, I think part of the problem with some earlier approaches to reconciliation was that it left too many people, particularly in white Australia, off the hook. The Government does not seek to wind back or undermine native title or land rights. I say in the name of the Government that we will reach out, we will meet the Indigenous people of this country more than halfway if necessary.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** Noel Pearson, welcome to the program.

**NOEL PEARSON:** Thank you.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** I want to go through some of the issues that the Prime Minister raised during the week. In the first place he acknowledged that reconciliation is about symbols as well as practical achievement, about symbols and about recognising past injustices. Was that progress on his part, as you saw it?

**NOEL PEARSON:** Barrie, this has been one of the most under reported speeches in the history of Howard's Prime Ministership. I think the shift that happened on Monday this week has been fundamentally tectonic in its significance because the Prime Minister has affirmed very clearly that symbols and practical reconciliation, as he has called it, both must occur.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** Why is that so important?

**NOEL PEARSON:** Because I think the previous emphasis on symbols, or at least the perception of many conservative commentators and leaders that the previous definition of what reconciliation was all about was too much concerned with symbolic acts and not much concern about practical change. I think that that process has worked out over these long seven or eight years into an understanding on both sides that both symbols and practical change have to go together and I recognise in the Prime Minister that this balance is crucial.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** He did say at one stage too that there has been so much emphasis on symbols, and I suppose he is talking about things like the walk across the bridge, for example, that allowed white Australia to get off the hook, in other words they could dodge the hard stuff in the communities.

**NOEL PEARSON:** I myself have been very sceptical about the hope that many Australians located in the large groundswell of community support that the bridge walks represented, I thought at the time and I still think to this day that whilst those events gave expression to sentiment and to empathy and

support for reconciliation, the important business is to change the material living conditions and daily lives of Aboriginal people so that they take a fair place in their home country. I was astounded to hear John Howard say that his problem with the bridge walks, that he felt that non-Indigenous Australians, political leaders and community members were being let off the hook by that simple act rather than being held to the more difficult challenge of changing the real life prospects of Indigenous people.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** On passive welfare as well, he said this is a challenge for Australia generally, not just a problem for Indigenous Australia. Was that an important thing to say?

**NOEL PEARSON:** I think so. I mean I have been obviously a big advocate of the need for really fundamental welfare reform, because I think that it is a crucial problem underpinning our disadvantaged. Until we get on top of passive welfare we will never be able to get on top of our life expectancy deficit problem. But, at the same time, I think it has got to be recognised that it's not just Indigenous people who are suffering from the problems of passive welfare. There are non-Indigenous communities in this country who suffer from real disadvantage.

The real disadvantage that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians suffer in the lowest classes in this country is the passing on of dependency between generations and all of the social problems that rise from inter-generational dependency and I see this, I see emerging signs in the mainstream community that white Australians are suffering as much from the problems of welfare dependency as Indigenous communities are.

Indigenous communities are really a wake up call. Thirty years later the Indigenous communities of Australia represent a wake up call for mainstream community - that if you put people and families in a situation of inter-generational dependency, then really tragic social problems will arise.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** Is that because there is a bit of an industry surrounding the whole question of the disadvantaged, to an extent?

**NOEL PEARSON:** Of course government and institutions and organisations and political leaders and bureaucrats and so on, they have a role and they have a responsibility as well to provide services and so on. But let's not forget the normal responsibilities that functional people take in a society and the problem that has happened in the Indigenous community is that there has been a collapse of those normal responsibilities and that vacuum has been filled by bureaucratic and governmental and welfare service responsibility, and we will never get on to our social problems until we restore individuals and families taking charge of their own destinies. There has sprung up a very substantial industry that is premised on the continuation of Indigenous passivity.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** That industry and that bureaucracy can do nothing about petrol sniffing and domestic violence and so on?

**NOEL PEARSON:** Well, the responsibility that has been assumed by all of these programs and all of these people is really a nominal responsibility. It's a kind of responsibility in name only because to get on top of petrol sniffing requires families, requires communities and requires individuals to take charge of the problems and I think that this business of Government retreating and playing the role of enabling and supporting disadvantaged people to get on top of social problems, that is a real agenda for Government.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** I just want to shift the conversation to land rights. The Prime Minister said the Government does not seek to wind back or undermine native title or land rights. Again, was that an important guarantee and do you believe him?

**NOEL PEARSON:** It is an important guarantee and the Prime Minister must be taken at his word. The anxiety in the Indigenous community that the imminent Senate majority may be used to derogate or to take away or to attack the existing rights of Aboriginal people to their lands is a real anxiety and the Prime Minister's assurance on Monday I think was extremely important for reconciliation.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** He made the point that practical benefits though have not flowed from land

rights. Now that takes you on to the question of whether within the framework, the communal framework, whether you can really have land ownership and leasing arrangements?

**NOEL PEARSON:** Well, you know, there are communities in other first world societies that have had to grapple with this. The important principal is to preserve the underlying communal title whilst facilitating the use of particular lands by individuals for economic development purposes.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** I just wonder how this sits with this culture built around kinship. Pat Dodson spoke this week about the dangers of elevating the individual above traditions and values forged over 50,000 years.

**NOEL PEARSON:** Many people see the relationship between the communal and the family and individual as an insuperable contradiction. My own view is that there need not be a contradiction. There are many societies where the balance has been able to be reconciled and I believe that we can preserve communal integrity and identity whilst at the same time encouraging individual and private initiative.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** When the Prime Minister says that he is prepared to meet you more than halfway if necessary, what can he really bring to the table in the end, what specifically would you like to see the Government contribute?

**NOEL PEARSON:** Well I think, you know, the starkest illustration of our challenge is the life expectancy deficit of 20-plus years between black Australians and white Australians. In order for us to overcome that we will need a sustained commitment to rights, responsibilities, symbols and practical change. We will need that commitment to survive as national policy for the next 20 to 30 years.

We can no longer keep deviating through the latest fashionable policies of the government of the day. Rather, we need to commit to a relationship and to a policy direction that will survive for the next 20 to 30 years because without that kind of sustained commitment we will never be able to break a life expectancy deficit of 25 years. It's going to require a generation of commitment and I think the challenge for the Prime Minister and the challenge for the Indigenous leadership is that I think over the coming period after, I think, an important start last week, over the coming period we are going to have to put together the consensus around the basic policies that we will follow for the next two to three generations.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** Do you think the talk of a separate Indigenous affairs portfolio is an important one?

**NOEL PEARSON:** You know, we are going back to the old Department of Aboriginal Affairs. If we think that's a new idea, we did that in the 70s and 80s. Indeed we moved to ATSIC because of the shortcomings of having a department that was committed to Indigenous affairs alone. I reckon it's a neither here nor there debate.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** You started out by saying you thought the Prime Minister's speech was one of the most unreported in history. Clearly you feel the media didn't get it. Do you think the Indigenous leadership got it?

**NOEL PEARSON:** I don't think they did. It was a really weird phenomena on Monday. I think that the kind of speech that people I think have been waiting for for a long time from the Prime Minister, that is in particular the recognition that rights and symbols are an integral part of reconciliation, when we finally got what I think - I have watched John Howard assiduously since 1996 and I think that this is his finest speech, the one he delivered on Monday. I think that both the Indigenous leadership and the media generally overlooked the importance of that speech.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** You are putting it right up there with Paul Keating's Redfern speech.

**NOEL PEARSON:** I think it's the beginning of a process, Barrie.

**BARRIE CASSIDY:** Thanks for your time this morning, appreciate it.

**NOEL PEARSON:** Thanks Barrie.