

Pearson yet to learn lessons of leadership

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The indigenous expert would do well to collaborate and take counsel from others

SOME stories are unpleasant to read and, a little over a month ago, this newspaper published one of them. It was about the slaughter of green turtles and dugongs by indigenous people on their native lands.

The reporter, Sarah Elks, described a scene in which a green turtle was flipped on to its shell, its head was bludgeoned and its flippers sliced off, apparently while it was still alive.

In another scene, a dugong was tied behind a boat and left to drown.

The story quoted animal rights activists appalled by the apparent cruelty, and sensitive Aboriginal hunters who valued their status as responsible custodians of the land.

It contained allegations, probably true, that some indigenous people travelled to Cape York to kill dugongs in large numbers, pretending it was part of their culture and the meat was for their families, when in fact they intended to sell it to Torres Strait Islander communities in Townsville and Cairns. (Commercial exploitation of the traditional hunting practices is banned under the Native Title Act.)

To my mind, the article was balanced: Aboriginal Australians have the right to kill dugongs and turtles on their native lands but they can't be cowboys about it. As in many sensitive stories concerning race, there was always the possibility someone would explode in reaction to the story.

In this case, as so often in my experience as a journalist, the person who exploded was Cape York indigenous leader Noel Pearson.

I wasn't party to the phone call Pearson made to the reporter, but I understand he was extremely angry. Anyone who knows Pearson will understand what that means: he used language so foul it couldn't be repeated here, leaving the journalist stunned and shaken, before slamming the phone down in her ear.

I've known Pearson since the early 1990s, and I wish I could say I was surprised to hear he had behaved so awfully towards somebody who really didn't deserve it. But the sad truth is, I wasn't.

Like many others, I've long understood that, for all his charisma and brilliance, Pearson is only human and therefore, like all of us, well short of perfect.

To give what will come in this column some context, I should say I've worked closely with Pearson for more than 15 years, and I've long admired his "beautiful mind", and his gift for sweet oratory.

There was a time -- not so long ago, actually -- when I believed Pearson had the potential to mature into a leader for both black and white Australia, perhaps even into the space once occupied by the late, great Charles Perkins.

Pearson was one of the first Aboriginal leaders to argue for an end to the flow of cheap alcohol -- he called it poison -- into remote communities and town camps to protect women and children from Aboriginal men, and Aboriginal men from themselves.

He bravely identified welfare -- "sit-down money" -- as being just as pernicious as booze, and he encouraged a difficult but important debate about Aboriginal people and personal responsibility.

Pearson argued for policy that would force Aboriginal parents, with financial penalties if necessary, to take their children to school and to properly feed and clothe them.

It would be no exaggeration to say that I have written hundreds of articles about Pearson, supporting him, and his ideas. The papers I have written for, Brisbane's *The Courier-Mail* and *The Australian*, have given him weekly or fortnightly columns in their high-selling Saturday papers.

I would like to say I was not blind to his faults -- his tendency to carry into a room a whiff of intellectual superiority, for example, that can at times veer dangerously close to abrasive arrogance -- but I did sometimes turn a blind eye.

In November 1999, Pearson poured a glass of water over the head of ABC radio interviewer Sharon Molloy after she asked a question he did not like. (Pearson apologised two days later when the incident got reported.)

He has abused me more than once, but most viciously after I wrote about the Djarragun College in Cairns after it was accused of fraudulently claiming government funding by falsely inflating student numbers. Pearson didn't think the story should be written, and he blasted me down the phone, telling me that I was a "f...ing disgrace" who had "made a living out of the misery of Aboriginal people".

I wondered at the time whether he would have hurled that allegation at me had we been standing face-to-face.

Former Queensland premier Anna Bligh told me years ago that I should not feel Pearson's contempt extended only to journalists. She said he destroyed a solid supporter base in her government by abusing officials who genuinely tried to help implement his responsibilities agenda, telling them they were "f...ing racist white

c. .s". Bligh's predecessor, Peter Beattie, who worked closely with Pearson, recently confirmed to me another incident where a female public servant was abused by Pearson over the phone in those terms.

I can't say why I've never publicly criticised Pearson for this kind of behaviour before. Perhaps I thought his sudden outbursts and his often bitter tongue were part of the price we had to pay for his brilliance. Was I too thrilled, especially in the early years, at the sight of Pearson, burning bridges and stepping on toes, saying what nobody else would say, in his bid to save Aboriginal Australia?

I suppose because I'm older than Pearson, I also figured he would grow humbler over time and the grace that comes with age would strengthen him as a leader. I imagined him reaching out to others, taking wise counsel, drawing an ever-wider circle of influence, as he sought to improve the plight of his people.

It pains me to say the opposite has happened: Pearson's profile has blossomed, but so has his ego, and while that is only human, there have been consequences.

Instead of drawing people into his orbit, Pearson has succeeded in pushing almost everyone away. In recent weeks, as he stepped up a new and extraordinarily expensive campaign for more funds for Cape York schools, he has taken to berating people who could actually teach him a thing or two.

The talented assistant director-general of indigenous education and training futures at Queensland's Education Department, Ian Mackie, for example, has a lifetime of teaching and learning behind him, but Pearson won't give him the time of day.

Chris Sarra, who in 2010 was named Queensland Australian of the Year for his work with Aboriginal children, and who spent seven years as principal of the Cherbourg Aboriginal community school before establishing the Cherbourg TAFE, has also fallen foul of Pearson.

Sarra does not support the Pearson model, which attempts to force children to attend school by threatening to financially penalise the parents by cutting welfare benefits -- but he has other ideas, some of which seem to work.

Pearson's response is it's my way or the highway. Pearson is asking the federal government to invest something like \$70 million in a Direct Instruction system of teaching for Cape York community schools. According to a draft proposal doing the rounds, it is Pearson's Cape York Partnerships with input from Pearson's Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy that has developed the plan, which in turn has been overseen by a steering committee of which Pearson is a member.

When Pearson was at the peak of his popularity, nobody would have questioned this, but now they want to know: why do the huge amounts of money that flow to the Cape always seem to go through organisations connected to Pearson? What evidence is there the millions of taxpayer dollars that have gone into Pearson's projects through the years -- the Cape York Institute, Cape York Land Council, Balkanu and Cape York Partnerships -- have eased the burden of his people?

These are questions Pearson does not want to answer, but we must not be afraid to ask them, for the truth is this: for all his restless energy, Pearson cannot solve every problem of Aboriginal Australia on his own.

On the contrary, his desire -- and I believe it to be genuine -- to restore dignity to Aboriginal people in remote communities is much likelier to be achieved by intelligent people with a range of skills working collaboratively on issues of substance.

That requires leadership, and that is a real problem. Pearson knows as well as anyone he has never spoken for all of Aboriginal Australia. There are many in Aboriginal communities who have long said that where he goes, they will not follow.

By contrast, his standing in the world of policy and funding is immense, and what a calamity it would be if those special gifts Pearson has been given -- to communicate and to inspire -- never developed into that quite different skill, the ability to lead.