
Activist slams Cape reformer

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CAPE York leader Noel Pearson has come under attack for his stance on indigenous welfare projects.

Townsville-based activist Professor Gracelyn Smallwood, in her just released doctoral thesis, is highly critical of Mr Pearson's power and influence, and his stance on passive welfare and education.

"Just because Pearson's zero tolerance approach sounds tough, does not make it effective," Prof Smallwood, a Birri elder, said.

Mr Pearson, a former lawyer, high-profile Aboriginal intellectual and Cape York Institute director, in responding to some of the harsh critique, yesterday told The Courier-Mail he welcomed debate.

But Mr Pearson said he doubted Prof Smallwood's research involved much fieldwork in the indigenous communities voluntarily taking part in welfare reform on Cape York.

"I would like to join all indigenous people of good will in expressing congratulations to Dr Smallwood for her achievement," Mr Pearson, 46, said.

"It continues to be the case that indigenous women are achieving doctorates, and inspiring our younger people to similar goals.

"I understand Dr Smallwood is highly critical of my policies in Cape York. I welcome debate. I assume her critique is based on fieldwork research in Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale and Mossman Gorge - where the welfare reforms are actually happening. I look forward to reading her research results."

The comments come as federal and state governments await the findings of an independent review into the Family Responsibilities Commission, which has the power to dock welfare payments to indigenous families, due by June 30.

FRC commissioner David Glasgow said the report would determine "whether we are a waste of money or not".

A Cape York Institute spokesman said the welfare reforms had been a success where "domestic violence was down; home savings up; backyards tidy; kids fed, clothed and

going to school; in a marked improvement of health and wellbeing in the townships".

But Prof Smallwood said her reading of the latest data showed the FRC did not work.

"Its central mechanism of the family conference has no effect whatsoever on school attendance," she said. "Moreover, close to 60 per cent of the money spent goes on (mainly white) wages."