

THE MONTHLY

Cape Tribulations: Noel Pearson and the Welfare Reform Trial

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August 2012

Tony Abbott last headed to Aurukun, a smattering of yellow, blue and green houses on the west coast of Cape York, three years ago. At the invitation of Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute, he stayed for a week to see how its Welfare Reform Trial was progressing. I was there, too. At the time, Abbott was the Shadow Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs – "for my sins", as he liked to quip, though it was only a half-joke, given his loose performance in the 2007 election campaign.

He stayed on his own, sans advisers, at the local guesthouse. He'd start each day at sunrise, with a 10-kilometre run. At this hour, camp dogs still ruled the streets, and Abbott had been well advised to take a big stick. Finding a 10-kilometre circuit was a stretch: he'd run out past the renovated pool, the closed pub and the Archer River boat ramp, then through some open melaleuca woodland to a small beach, and back via a lap of the airstrip. After breakfast, Abbott loped to the school, then the worst-performing in Queensland, to sit in on the roll call, before accompanying one of two truancy officers on their rounds.

Before welfare reform, six in ten children wagged school on any given day. Now, the home of every absent child was doorknocked, not so much to entice the kids into thinking school was a good idea as to persuade their bleary-eyed parents. In Aurukun, as in any welfare ghetto, indigenous or otherwise, the root problem wasn't the kids wagging school; it was the parents wagging parenting. This epiphany, which came to Pearson in 1999, after he'd poured ten years of energy into achieving land rights only to find Cape York communities degenerating without pause, underpins the immense ambition of his reforms. By fundamentally changing the delivery of welfare income, education, health and housing, he aimed to fix families, no less.

In 2009, a year and a bit into the trial, things were surprisingly on track. Aurukun hadn't looked so good, or peaceable, in years. Eighteen months earlier, when the pub still thrummed, the toy of choice had been a ubiquitous "tin truck" – an empty infant-formula can pulled along on a string. Now, almost everywhere you looked, kids were leaping on and off trampolines, bikes and skateboards. Still, a first-time visitor like Abbott would have been hard-pressed to see the difference. During his week in the village, cars were stolen, windscreens were smashed. On pension day the sly grog flowed, gamblers huddled under houses and a chair was thrown through a classroom window. In one soiled shell of a home, a 10-year-old girl, whom Abbott had been gently chiding, pulled a kitchen knife on the shadow minister, who nimbly retreated to let the truancy officer continue negotiations.

In the afternoons, Abbott sat in on classes to observe the trial's 'Direct Instruction' method of teaching, or he went fishing. One day he attended a sitting of the Family

Responsibilities Commission, the ‘stick’ in Pearson’s carrot-and-stick approach to fostering responsible parenting. The FRC, which consists of a magistrate and a panel of local elders, has the power to sequester welfare payments from parents whose children repeatedly get in trouble or miss school.

After his stay in Aurukun, Abbott met and lunched with Noel Pearson on the waterfront in Cairns. Abbott had already told me there were three “wise men” in his life: John Howard, Cardinal George Pell and Pearson. Accordingly, he seemed a little awed, even timid, in Pearson’s presence, though weren’t we all – as Pearson’s brother Gerhardt, speaking for both of them, once told me: “We don’t do friends. We just do useful people.”

This month Abbott will return to Aurukun, along with several other useful people, such as James Packer, Andrew Forrest and Michael Chaney, the chairman of Woodside Petroleum and the National Australia Bank. The men are staying for three days, ostensibly to help rebuild the school library, a dilapidated bungalow in the heart of town, but the visit also happens to be a particularly timely show of support for Pearson. His Welfare Reform Trial, to which the Cape York communities of Hope Vale, Mossman Gorge and Coen also signed up, was initially funded for four years, to 1 July 2012. Encouraged by the results so far, the federal government has agreed to extend its support to December 2013, at a cost of \$11.8 million. Interim reports show families are saving money, more kids are going to school, court appearances are down, homes and gardens are being improved and the education gap is closing, albeit from a very low base. Indeed, the shambolic state schools have been wholly transformed into the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, with school days expanded by two hours to include sports and culture programs. However, the Queensland government, required to pay its share, was still playing hard to get at the time of writing, citing “probity issues”.

It’s been a tough six months for Pearson. Until recently, he enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with Chris Mitchell, the editor of the Australian. Mitchell ran a regular column by Pearson, and prominently backed his initiatives in the news pages. But the relationship cooled last year when the Australian began pursuing enrolment funding improprieties at an indigenous school supported by Pearson, Djarragun College, south of Cairns. Pearson wrote his last column in February. Two months later, the Australian ran an extraordinarily vehement attack on his leadership by Tony Koch, who for ten years had been Pearson’s pet journalist at the paper. This act of treachery, as Pearson’s camp saw it, sparked a salvo of other mud-slinging pieces, both in the Australian and elsewhere; a harsh profile is due in the Fairfax press any Saturday now. All the while there was not a word from Pearson who, it turns out, was undergoing chemotherapy.

“I must admit a few bleak thoughts have gone through my head these past months,” he told me, in his first interview since moving his young family to the Sunshine Coast early this year, for the sake of peace and treatment. “I’m 47 this year, going on 67. The average life expectancy of males at my end of the country is 49. When I look at my class picture at Hope Vale State School, there are a lot of friends missing.”

Days before Koch’s attack, Neville Pootchemunka, the longstanding mayor of Aurukun and Pearson’s key ally, died suddenly. He was 48. “That was a kick in the solar plexus, especially if you’re involved with a challenge like Aurukun,” says

Pearson. "It's such a small show we're working on. That's the only way we've been able to get traction on welfare reform, with leaders like Neville. We couldn't do welfare reform across the country. We couldn't do welfare reform across the indigenous country.

"At the bottom of the pyramid, the gravitational force holding people in a position of disadvantage and dysfunction is so much stronger than in normal society. Sometimes I think, This is all too hard, we're never going to get there, my time is up, but then 24 hours later I get these big plans again. I've got this conviction we're going to succeed."

Still, there has been a subtle shift in Pearson's focus. He no longer rails about breaking the shackles of welfare dependency, having come to accept that, in some communities at least, welfare is all people are ever likely to have.

"Our starting point remains the idea of using welfare to your best advantage and not pissing it up against the wall. Just make sure you look after the kids, keep them clothed, give them tuckshop money, buy them books. You now see families saving their money for a fridge, or for furniture, or to send a child to boarding school in Cairns."

Across the four signed-up communities, which have a combined population under 3000, parents have voluntarily put about \$1.5 million into individual education funds over the course of the trial. "If we can support parents like this, even if you don't have a job, you're halfway to setting a foundation for your children."

I reminded Pearson of something he'd told me before the trial commenced: that if it failed, he'd have no more answers. "I think that's right. I've got to say the whole Koch thing, I can't tell you how close that came to defeating me. I was drugged out as hell [from chemo] and not seeing clearly. I thought my time was up. But I'd also really reached a point where I thought, OK, we've done a trial here. We've shown what's possible.

"There's a real crossroads here for the country, which is to say: are we serious about just containing and managing the problem, or actually resolving it? And that becomes a question of investment. If indigenous families are going to get their act together, there's got to be a real investment in an expansion of the educational opportunities. You can't just focus on it when there's a crisis of child protection, you know. It's an issue that requires steady application."

One gets the sense that Pearson, who is in remission from his lymphoma, just needs this year to end. After that, it is near certain, Tony Abbott will become very useful indeed.

Published in *The Monthly* August 2012