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**Cape York 'champion' scheme a trial for a true partnership**

By Noel Pearson  
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Greens spokesman Drew Hutton (C-M Letters, Aug 30) has poured scorn on the Queensland Government's decision to require the directors-general of various departments to "champion" the development of partnerships between government and Aboriginal communities.

This is an initiative aimed at the remote Aboriginal communities of Cape York Peninsula, where the social disasters associated with substance abuse and passive welfare dependency were brought to national attention by Tony Koch's dogged campaign in *The Courier-Mail*. It is a tragic situation of great concern to all fair-minded Queenslanders, black and white.

Hutton says the concept is "tokenistic" and that the Beattie Government should "accept indigenous self-determination as a basic principle of indigenous affairs".

Well, if this is a question of self-determination, then Hutton should first understand that the concept of "champions" was developed by Cape York Aboriginal leaders and put to the state, not the other way around. Moreover, at the Cape York Land and Health Summit held at Laura two weeks ago, a resolution moved by Pormpuraaw elder Bob Holroyd and seconded by Wujal Wujal chairman Peter Wallace unanimously endorsed the State Government's adoption of the "champions" concept.

Perhaps it is Hutton who should first accept the principle of indigenous self-determination. The problem of unco-ordinated bureaucracy is a universal problem, that eludes governments across the world. For communities that are in trouble, and urgently require "holistic", "whole of government" support, there needs to be a solution so that people in these communities receive the kind of support from government that is necessary to solve problems and to develop opportunities.

In Cape York we are trialling some novel solutions to the problems that unco-ordinated bureaucracy represent for our people.

First, we want to give some meaning to the concept of "partnership" between government and our people. Partnership is based on some simple realities: government cannot solve the Aboriginal challenge alone, our people cannot do it alone -- we need to confront the challenges in partnership, with the government as the junior partner.

Second, we are trying to base the partnership on negotiation, not just consultation. We want to enable communities and their leaders and workers to sit down at the table with government representatives and negotiate resolutions around plans and priorities that have been determined by Aboriginal people as the way forward.

Third, we want to join up the efforts and contributions of different government departments and community groups -- so that we can achieve "holistic" responses to problems and opportunities.

Fourth, we want our people to take responsibility. I have said that, ultimately, self-determination means that we have a right as indigenous people to take responsibility. We will get nowhere if our people do not take charge of our own future.

Finally, we want government to be accountable to make partnerships work. This is where the decision by the directors-general of the Queensland Government to "champion" partnerships in particular communities fits in. Who better than those people at the top of the agencies of government to account for the success or failure of bureaucrats in forging a new relationship with Aboriginal communities?

It will not be easy. Even as politicians have developed policies aimed at "co-ordination" and "whole of government" solutions -- these aspirations have never worked in practice on the ground. There is no guarantee that the methods we are trialling in Cape York will work.

I was at first cynical about the Premier's instruction that progress on Cape York partnerships be included in the performance contracts of the top bureaucrats. I am now convinced that placing responsibility squarely in the hands of the people in charge of the bureaucracy is a critical part of the solution.

In order for the Queensland bureaucracy to move to a new relationship with Aboriginal communities -- based on true partnership, negotiation and mutual accountability -- it will be necessary for the directors-general to take first responsibility for making this change work in practice. If there is no progress at Aurukun, then Ken Smith, director-general of the Department of Employment and Training will have to account -- along with his Aurukun community counterparts -- for it.

If there is no progress at Hope Vale, then Leo Keliher, director-general of the Premier's Department, and his Hope Vale counterparts, will be accountable.

Unlike Sir Humphrey Appleby in *Yes Minister*, Queensland's directors-general have agreed to take a risk, personally and directly, to address what is without doubt, Queensland's gravest and most important public policy challenge -- to help Aboriginal communities on the road to social and economic recovery. This week, Parliament will pass legislation dealing with alcohol and community justice. Government is taking real action to solve real problems. The Commonwealth Government and ATSIC are also developing a similar approach and its Indigenous Partnerships Taskforce will dovetail in with Beattie's Cape York Partnerships policy.

We must put behind us the rhetoric of self-determination as if it is some magical solution that can materialise on a plate; rather it is up to community leaders from Cape York to take responsibility to make self-determination work in practice.

*Noel Pearson is the leader of the community team of Cape York Partnerships*