

Noel Pearson's 'social experiments' in North Queensland are failing

- By Jack Wilkie-Jans
November 24 2015

Much of Noel Pearson's, his colleagues' and his supporters' praise-garnering rhetoric revolves around the notion of "self determination".

It is a catch-phrase when stripped back and looking beyond the mixed reviews of Pearson, his ideology and practicality of his theories, which echoes responsibility and productivity. The one overlooked factor in the seemingly unequivocal (from city-based academics) support for Pearson's catch-phrase is that, one person's self-determination cannot be everybody's.



The implementation of Pearson's social theories, placed into practice as social experiments in remote Aboriginal towns in Cape York, was based on the idea that Noel Pearson's self-determination could be applied to others. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

The implementation of Pearson's social theories, placed into practice as social experiments in remote Aboriginal towns in Cape York, was based on the idea that Pearson's self-determination could be applied to others. This was the fundamental flaw in this strategy - aside from the fact that one cannot always hasten philosophy into action.

Also a main shortcoming of all the social experiments promoted and funded under the motto of "self determination" are implemented rather paternalistically, ie alcohol management plans, welfare reform - basically rules and policies which inhibit a person's ability to make choices and suffer subsequent consequences. Paternalistic policy ignores people's right to fail,

which is one of the key steps in achieving growth and capability, hence it truly ignores people's right to succeed as well. So to pull a Pauline, when it comes to "self determination", the supposed guiding principle in all these policies, I ask: please explain?



Then-prime minister Tony Abbott meets with Noel Pearson during his visit to North-East Arnhem Land in 2014. Photo: Alex Ellinghausen

The recent groundswell of Traditional Owners (TOs) and non-Aboriginal members of the Cape York community who are standing up for Cape York's autonomy are demonstrating true self-determination. They are taking matters of economic and social development, as well as cohesion, and striving for political clout and decision making autonomy in their stride. Sadly such actions have been met with disdain from so-called Cape York leaders such as Noel and Gerhardt Pearson. True leaders encourage and if they disagree, they accept. They do not ridicule and undermine.

Recent demonstrations of self-determination, not to mention the value of difference, is met with attacks from the likes of Noel and Gerhardt Pearson and as such it would seem that the hypocrisy of the self-determination mantra has become clear. It is not determination of the "self" but in fact, pre-determination of the masses.

The initiative shown by the Cape York Alliance is unique and the formation of the multi/cross-cultural Council of Elders is historic. This historic coming together took place at the Alliance's inaugural Cape York Summit over November 15-16 at Laura.

The groundswell, led by the Cape York Alliance, while there to create new and improved means of self-governance in Cape York, is chiefly against the monopolisation of economic and decision-making control in the Cape. This has been a long time coming and with the lack of promised, widespread benefits endeavours such as the Welfare Reform Trials and the (culturally void) One Claim (across Cape York, led by the Cape York Land Council) have failed to bring about has spurred on the recent mobilisation.

As an example, the Welfare Reform Trials is not self-determination, it is extremely expensive paternalism. The trials are fundamentally flawed as remote townships find it extremely difficult, to almost impossible, to venture into any meaningful economic opportunities given the constraints of land tenure and blanket conservation. I liken progress of the trials to the steps taken by the previous Newman-led LNP government in Queensland to provide freehold for Aboriginal communities. Freehold meaning loans and rates to be paid, but how? Welfare Reform Trials is supposed to be the weaning of people off of welfare, but on to what? The economic opportunities in the Cape have not yet been realised and have not yet been properly made accessible due to conflicting policies from the state and federal governments: the Cape York Regional Plan (being the state's) which promotes a blanket lock-up approach to the Cape, and, the White Paper on Northern Australia (being the federal) which promotes the growth of primary industries. Currently these two policies are at odds and are confusing the economic outlook for the Cape region. Introducing policies such as freehold for Aboriginal communities and welfare reform are never going to be effective without the first steps in place, first steps being opportunity. In the absence of further opportunities these policies are setting people up to fail.

As a side note, the "trials" seem to be going on forever.

The Alcohol Management Plans are the same. In communities deemed so severely dependent on alcohol that they live under outright bans on alcohol, with punishments for carrying even a thimble full of grog earning either prison sentences or up to \$70,000 in fines, it makes one wonder why the policy isn't holistic if the problems and punishments are so severe. Where are the rehabilitation centres and extra incentives for mental health professionals or placements for such areas? As mentioned above, this is yet another policy innocent people labour under which is setting them up to fail.

It would seem the intent of mission towns, being "out of sight and out of mind", is paying off for the status quo.

There is much controversy surrounding the Welfare Reform Trails, which appears at first glance to be a reasonable policy. So far the (lengthy) trials have cost both state and federal governments in excess of \$150 million in public funds yet still requires the quarantining of people's welfare payments to supposedly carry out its purpose and to micro-manage the spending of an otherwise supposedly free peoples. This is blatantly presuming the ineptitude of all Aboriginal people in the Cape bar the Pearson brothers. However the real controversy in this regard is the fact that the reforms (which are opt in, but not opt out-able) were sold with fork tongues to people who didn't realise they would not have access to their quarantined funds for about 26 years, after their children have finished school and only for pre-determined purposes. Another example of the messed-up reality of Pearson's "social experiments".

Furthermore, the town of Coen, which, despite popular opinion, is not an Aboriginal community as it is under the very mainstream Cook Shire Council, experienced what residents there are calling the ushering out of their only public school for many hundreds of kilometres. The Coen public primary school was replaced by one of Pearson's controversial Cape York Aboriginal Academies. Such publicly funded private schools are controversial because some have a history of mismanagement, they promote the technique of "direct instruction", as well as allegedly sending the grades off to the US to be compared while also, and allegedly, teaching the imperial system of measurement. Coen is not an Aboriginal

community and many of the school-age children are non-Indigenous. It's clear that Coen would benefit much more by a return to standardised human services delivery.

After all, isn't that what Closing the Gap is supposed to be about: bridging differences of approach, not creating separate ones?

There are numerous reports both for and against the effectiveness of the many social experiments taking place in Cape York. There are many, many people in Cape York who feel the determination belonging to Noel Pearson is an ill fit for the masses and feel that it is not altruistic and is not advancing their standard of living. Furthermore I invite people to come to Cape York and see for themselves these places where hundreds of millions of "feel good" funds are being sent and to meet and talk to the people all this money is allegedly being spent on behalf of. If you do that you will learn of the failings of this separate approach to Aboriginal peoples' lives on Cape York.

The long and short of it stands as thus: if Pearson's theories were so successful, why are the benefits not felt throughout?

One of the criticisms the Cape York Alliance received (and no doubt because it is a cross-cultural alliance, with "white" members) is that the organisation is against "economic participation and advancement of Aboriginal people", or something to that effect. Looking at the governance structures of all the companies funded or bank-rolled by the public purse which are under the directorship of Noel Pearson, his brother Gerhardt, Richie Ah Mat and close friend Alan Creek (to name only a few of the small group), companies such as Cape York Timber, Cape York Quarries and Cape York Institute and so on, you will see familiar names in each of the limited number of shareholders and directors. I would like to see this close-knit circle of fellow board members, directors and shareholders give their organisation(s)' constitutions an airing and open up the economic benefits of these numerous companies to the wide selection of Traditional Owners from Cape York.

But the most the rest seem to get from the self-appointed best is a dependence on long-term welfare reform. That's the extent of opportunity and economic advancement they're afforded, no ownership and no benefits from the companies-a-plenty set up and funded under the proviso of benefiting the majority.

The calls for this to change, the purpose of this article, is not a class issue, this is a human issue. This is about regions like the Cape and the Traditional Owners who have said time and time again that Pearson doesn't represent them, to be able to achieve some decision-making autonomy away from the vice-like grip over Cape York and Aboriginal affairs which Pearson holds.

Taking an even bigger step back, we see this isn't really Pearson's doing either. The reputation he has built due to the illusion of advancing some of the currently most disadvantaged peoples of Australia, is merely a product, not of his academic prowess, but of successive governments placing Aboriginal affairs in the "too hard" basket. Through Pearson they found an avenue, a strong voice, someone they can trust to give them their due credit regarding Aboriginal affairs and relations, this is called "ease of consultation".

It is not fair representation of neither First Peoples across Australia and least of all of Cape York Traditional Owners. The way things are in Cape York is crippling the self-esteem and opportunity of the people there.

Something has to change. Pearson's experiments are clearly failing and it's time to go back to the drawing board - after all, no experiment succeeds the first time off, especially without significant review.

I put it to Australia and the governments, that instead of one man, let the diverse peoples of the Cape steer and implement their future.

Jack Wilkie-Jans is an Aboriginal affairs advocate and artist.