

THE CONVERSATION

Noel Pearson and white Masochism

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Noel Pearson.

For years Noel Pearson has been using people like me as a punching bag, and I'm sick of it. Having cajoled and bullied one government after another into pouring millions into his pet schemes, thereby depriving more worthy Indigenous projects of funds, they have failed, failed and failed again. And so he resorts to type, casting around for someone to blame, venting his seemingly bottomless rage against everyone who does not praise his vision.

This time he has unleashed a volley of vituperation against the ABC and various other FWCs (see below). "Racists", the lot of them; not, mind you, because the ABC depicts Aboriginal fathers as no-hopers, or because it has attacked Indigenous welfare, or because it has justified locking up black kids.

No, the ABC is a "miserable racist" organisation because it stands in the way of the kind of "radical centre" policies Pearson champions. There he was again the other day at a book launch wheeling out his wearying form of faux-Martin Luther King oratory:

"They [the ABC] need blacks to remain alien from mothers' bosoms, carceral in legions, living short lives of grief and tribulation. Because, if it was not so, against whom could they direct their soft bigotry of low expectations, about whom could they report misery and bleeding tragedy?"

“Mothers’ bosoms”, “carceral in legions”, “bleeding tragedy”: gimme a break. This is not soaring rhetoric but pompous twaddle in search of a scapegoat.

More to the point, it’s spiteful and unjust. Yet it’s just the kind of bigoted lashing Pearson has been serving up for years, and which is cheered by figures on the radical right who love any attack on “the left”, like Tony Abbott and Maurice Newman and Pearson’s patrons at *The Australian*.

The mystery is why so many people with a progressive outlook – who have a proven commitment to doing something, anything, about the shocking state of Indigenous disadvantage – just roll over, mesmerized by these regular pummellings, like battered wives who defend their abusers.

Pearson’s bullying is legendary – a favourite oath is “f—king white c—s” (FWCs) – yet some white folks still can’t get enough of him. Troy Bramston invites him to launch his Keating biography. Gough Whitlam’s family chooses him to give the eulogy. He’s feted by the State Library of Victoria, Griffith University and the Sir Robert Menzies Trust. The ABC invited him to give the Boyer Lecture, although that was before he went feral.

Even the FWCs at the ABC and Fairfax still reverently seek his pearls of Indigenous wisdom.

“Black darling”

While white leaders and commentators fawn, Indigenous people, among whom Pearson is widely despised, have hit back. Indigenous activists have challenged his claim to any kind of leadership, accusing him of a “love affair with white Australia” or, in the words of Darumbul woman Amy McQuire, of being the “undisputed black darling of Australian media”.

Activist Wayne Wharton says he is “always more comfortable where there’s no Aboriginal people or Aboriginal people that aren’t articulate”. Black activists burnt his effigy. When Pearson walks into a room of Indigenous leaders it’s as if an Arctic wind just blew in.

Pearson has few followers in the Indigenous community – not even in his Cape York backyard – so any change must be imposed from the top. His missionary zeal leaves his people impassive and his programs flagging, though he can bring corporate CEO’s into Aurukun to paint the school library.

Pearson’s tough-love welfare reforms have seen governments pour millions into his patch in Cape York – “\$200 million over six years for 2961 people” according to one estimate – with minimal effect. Luckily for him, his programs are subject to “shockingly low scrutiny”.

Martin Luther King was a great orator because his words could move his people, as well as sympathetic white folks. Pearson’s oratory can make masochistic FWCs dewy-eyed and induce conservative politicians to pump ever-greater sums of cash into the black hole of Cape York.

But “his people” watch unmoved.

Among Pearson’s handful of Indigenous supporters is Rachel Perkins, Charles Perkins’ daughter. She admires his courage, not least because he is “fearless in confronting Aboriginal people themselves and being hated by them for it.”

Could that have been said of Dr King? That the mark of his leadership was to be hated by his own people? But that’s the thing about Noel Pearson: for all of his ferocious attacks on white reformers, underneath it all it’s Aboriginal people who really disappoint him.