

Man of his people

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The *Sunday Age*

Sunday, 6th June 2010

Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has his own past and the future of all indigenous children in mind as he travels with Miranda Devine to Cape York.

THOSE who know Noel Pearson well see traces of the ebullient child he once was in his five-year-old son, Charlie. On a two-day trip to Cape York from Cairns last week, Charlie Pearson sings sweetly to himself, draws elaborate pictures of solar systems, counts aloud and tells rollicking stories about dinosaurs and crocodiles to the adults around him, constantly good-natured about the attention they are not giving him but assertive enough to ensure his busy father cannot ignore him.

This tiny ball of energetic enterprise finally falls asleep after a lasagne dinner at the home of the principal of Aurukun school, his curly gold-flecked head on his dad's lap as the adults talk. Pearson, 45 this month, says he "put off the idea of children" for a long time, "and I regret it sincerely". Now the Cape York Aboriginal leader has Charlie, whose Aboriginal name is Ngulunhthul, and a daughter, three-year-old Melita, aka Mijili, who stayed home with her mother Tracey in Cairns last week. "Having kids heightens your anxiety about the fate of children, because I just can't bear the thought that children who are not mine, not all of them are guaranteed safety and a future and all those things that I insist on my children having. "What I find appalling about Australia is so much of the tragedy is needless . . . Society has to say that part of the parental obligation is you have to refrain from drug use in the bringing up of kids or society will intervene, because there is too much correlation between parental drug abuse and children's vulnerability. The high percentage of tragedy is within our means to avoid and we don't avoid it. "If we were concerted in our efforts, we could then say, 'Well, that's fate'. But what's happening now, particularly in Aboriginal communities, is not fate; it's because of our failure."

This is what motivates and consumes Pearson these days - the urgent needs of the children of Cape York's remote communities, which have spiralled into a Hobbesian social chaos under the twin burdens of passive welfare dependence and alcohol and drug abuse. Three years ago, to his great cost, he described his beloved home town of Hope Vale as a "ghetto", a "war zone", a "hellhole [where] the incidences of abuse that come to light are only the tip of the iceberg of sexual assault, unlawful intercourse with minors, and incest". It is a preoccupation that has turned him from the self-described "pin-up boy of progressive Australia" when he was the young barrister fighting for land rights in the 1980s, to the "antichrist" who insists with an uncompromising moral clarity on the "right" for Aboriginal people to take

responsibility for their own fate.

PEARSON grew up poor, the youngest of five brothers and a sister in the Lutheran mission of Hope Vale, and he slept with all his brothers in one bed. Yet people were "socially strong", with families and a community, which "are worth more than gold". His was the last of the generations left standing when the winds of social change swept through the cape, ending the benign overlordship of the missionary and ushering in a new era of alcohol, drugs and gambling.

Who Pearson is and how he thinks is inextricably tied to the unique history of Hope Vale, the memories of his parents and grandparents and the ghosts of his ancestors, and the sharp moral universe built over 75 years by Lutheran missionaries. The philosophy of social relationships that underpins his thinking on welfare reform and personal responsibility comes from the fabric of Hope Vale and the people he loves there, from the echoes of dispossession and tragedy and the achievement of forebears who endured and survived the greatest burdens of history.

Hope Vale's main street, Thiele Street, is lined with mango trees and frangipanis. Its most imposing building is St John's Lutheran Church. The grid-patterned streets have German names, after the long-dead missionaries who spent the bulk of their lives there, far from home. The greatest of them, says Pearson, was the Bavarian Georg Heinrich Schwarz, who arrived at what was then Cape Bedford at the tender age of 19, and spent the next 55 years building a God-fearing Christian community.

He died before Pearson was born, but the people of Hope Vale "owe an unrepayable debt" to Schwarz. He translated the gospels into Guugu-Yimidhirr and the local people dubbed him Muni, meaning "black", because they could not pronounce Schwarz, which was German for black. He was respected and loved by the older people, but among Pearson's generation, there was ambivalence. "I grew up with Muni towering over . . . in an ambivalent way. He was a great figure of our parents' and grandparents' stories . . . but I was also dealing with the fact there were two views of him. Some people who were very defensive of him were alarmed at the fact the younger generations were critical. "People often said if we didn't have him, we would have been done for.

He protected us from pretty terrible conditions on the frontier; from exploitation from pastoralists or miners or fishermen and so on. But the mission, as well as providing protection, also became a place which facilitated government policies such as moving [stolen] children to these missions." Muni married Hope Vale's schoolteacher, Mary, and they had two daughters. During WWII he was arrested and interned for being German.

The mission was evacuated to Woorabinda, west of Rockhampton, for fear that the Japanese might find collaborators among the German-schooled people of the northern frontier. It was a traumatic upheaval, says Pearson. A quarter of the community died of influenza within three months. They did not return to Hope Vale for seven years, and Muni, who was released from internment in 1944 at 76, retired. Pearson's aunt told him how Muni visited the community after he was released and "kind of apologised . . . and said he was conscious of how strict he had been, but that he was in a bind. He wouldn't let people go into Cooktown, for instance, because it

would have been a disaster, with grog and women exploited."

Muni is buried in Hope Vale, and Muni Day is celebrated every September. Pearson wrote of his ambivalence in his honours history thesis at Sydney University in 1986, "Dingoes, sheep and Mr Muni". HE HAD been a precocious child, and at the year 4 presentation day at Hope Vale Primary School, Pearson was singled out by principal Don Shiewe, who declared he would "eat my hat" if this boy didn't go to university. "It took everybody else by surprise, too, that this big ambition could happen, " says Pearson , "because a number of older people kept repeating it to me: 'You're going to go to university, boy.'

My parents would not have known what a university was, so it took somebody like a principal to plant the idea in my head. But the importance of reading and education had already been implanted by my parents." Pearson 's great-grandfather, Arrimi, was a Kuku Warra man, whose people were all but annihilated during the 1870s goldrush, and who spent most of his adult life hiding from police who wanted him on a mission. Pearson 's grandfather, Ngulunhthul, or Charlie, was removed from his father at age 10 and taken to the Cape Bedford mission. His grandmother also was a stolen child, taken to the mission from Chillagoe at the age of eight. Their son, Pearson 's father, Glen, a stockman, was literate in English and his Aboriginal language.

He had few books, but Pearson remembers his reading the Bible to him every night and saying: "Reading makes a full man." Pearson 's mother, Ivy, could not speak English nor read but was determined that her son would be different. Like many Hope Vale children at that time, Pearson was sent to the Lutheran boarding school in Brisbane, St Peter's. Unlike his peers, he went to Sydney University to study history.

But each time he came home on holiday, he was struck by the drastic changes engulfing Hope Vale in the late 1980s. The break from the mission had been inevitable in the wake of the 1960s social revolution, "but we didn't handle the transition well. We threw the baby out with the bathwater, and that was as much the church's fault as ours. They were reluctant to leave, they didn't see the world was changing and they were too defensive." At the same time, "we didn't realise how important was the moral code the missionary had instilled in our elders and how crucial that was and how fragile. What our elders were doing to uphold those things was a source of great strength, but we didn't handle [well] the permissive Australian society that was emerging."

Welfare money arrived in the early 1970s, and a fortnightly cycle of binge drinking was established with young men. "They've got nothing to do and they get free money every fortnight Wednesday and they're allowed to enter the pub so they're the first ones to abandon responsibility." In 1986 came the crippling blow when women started being employed under the work-for-the-dole program, rather than getting money from a child endowment allowance. It led to an "explosion of women drinking", says Pearson . "Women got an independent source of money that wasn't specifically child endowment. The social norm against women drinking suddenly collapsed and wasn't upheld. In a society like ours where no women drank . . . you can't underestimate the profound effect."

After his father died, Pearson went home for two years, and was elected to the Hope Vale council in 1988. He remembers that as the year marijuana arrived. "I was completely permissive about marijuana, not that I used it, but I'm a uni student. It would have been very uncool to be against it. So it became known these young guys were using marijuana and no one stepped up to say, 'No, our people have never used marijuana in this community and it would be a bad thing for it to start'. "In those days there was no association between marijuana and psychosis . . . you were just being an uptight Lutheran. All the things you needed to defend against the threat of marijuana were associated with the old missionaries.

So we were completely vulnerable to this thing taking off. "In the wake of it, Hope Vale had several suicides of young people on a combination of alcohol and drugs. There'd never been a suicide [before] 1990." HE WAS 25 when he went back to Sydney University for his law degree. He started the Cape York Land Council from his two-room bedsit in Balmain, with a computer and a fax machine and the help of a cousin in Cairns. His work on native title negotiations started in earnest when he moved to Melbourne as an articled clerk with Mark Leibler at the firm Arnold Bloch Leibler. It was there he was inspired by the Jewish community's ability to survive oppression and diaspora, and saw it as the model for his people. "They're the paragon of oppressed people who succeeded, proof that you don't have to cultivate victimhood. If you want to keep an identity as a community and be successful, then you're hard-pressed to bypass the Jews for inspiration." Armed with these ideas, he went back to Cairns. "I didn't repudiate land rights but I just said by itself it was not . . . a solution to our social problems and there's a social and economic agenda that had to be addressed." In 1999, he launched "our responsibilities agenda, which was meant to complement the rights agenda".

He found support in the Howard and Rudd governments, but alienated the middle-class left, who brand him socially conservative. He also is fighting the Wilderness Society over Wild Rivers legislation that will lock up Cape York's rivers and kill his people's best chance for economic development. His reform program includes quarantining of welfare payments, improving education, boosting school attendance, fostering home ownership and civic pride, banning alcohol and creating real economies. Through sheer force of will, he is carving order out of the darkness once again. At cape schools, where he is trialling a direct instruction program of rigorous testing and scripted lessons, his moral code is everywhere. It's in the motto on teachers' shirts at Coen, and at the gates of Aurukun school: "Get Ready, Work Hard, Be Good". These are the values of his forebears, "people with moral standing, a hard work ethic, and responsibility in their veins".

In his book *Up from the Mission*, published last year, Pearson wrote of his hometown: "When you live in a community like this, you can see the Old People, long dead, living in their descendants." In Hope Vale, he is Glen Pearson 's son, Charlie's grandson and old Arrimi's great-grandson - and in some magical alchemy of identity he also carries the moral capital of long-vanished missionaries from a Bavarian village on the other side of the planet.