

Differences of opinion far from searing attack

By Marion Scrymgour
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Indigenous leader denies 'demonising' Noel Pearson

IN an opinion piece published in The Weekend Australian last Saturday, Marcia Langton sought to uphold the reputation of her friend, Noel Pearson. It was unfortunate the peculiar strategy she adopted to achieve that objective was to attribute to me the role of Pearson's demoniser-in-chief within the "Aboriginal industry" and to claim that I had "denounced him for his Christianity and, in a searing personal attack, for his Lutheran upbringing".

She went on to assert (in relation to Kim Hill and me): "Of course, neither he nor Scrymgour could be accused of having read or understood Pearson's tracts. Their access to his work is through the newspaper headlines and hateful far-left blogs."

Before I respond to the things that Langton has written about me I would like to comment on my reaction to reading the Tony Koch article the previous week that had prompted Langton's defence. Pearson being criticised in a highly personal manner in The Weekend Australian? My immediate feeling was sympathy. I'd been there.

There had been a degree of mutual respect and interaction between Pearson and me for several years before our well-publicised opposing stances in relation to the Northern Territory intervention. Pearson was interested in work I had done before entering into politics in relation to the establishment and development of the Katherine West Health Board and the possible adoption of that model in Cape York.

I had made a visit to Cape York and we had discussed compulsory treatment legislation, which I wanted to introduce in the Territory to address petrol sniffing. Our views in relation to tackling alcohol abuse were (and remain) very similar, and we agreed on the fundamental importance of education and strong family values.

Pearson and I come from Christian (in my case, Catholic) backgrounds. The suggestion that I would attack him, or anyone, for their Christianity is ludicrous.

On May 6, 2008, I made a speech in the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly that made reference to Pearson. The speech can be accessed through the Territory government Hansard website, but the relevant part of it was as follows: "What has made Mr Pearson's view newsworthy is his assertion that he is some latter-day Martin Luther promoting a radical reform agenda that strikes against the long-held welfare-worshipping doctrines of the Labor Party. From my experience, that assertion amounts to a distorted fable as regards the Labor Party generally. It does not apply to me personally."

``For example, for many years I and many other people -- certainly before I entered politics -- were articulating the desirability of quarantining the welfare payment for parents who do not send their children to school. I have always maintained that any such measure should be enforced universally and not just against Aboriginal people. As I understand it, Mr Pearson would agree with me on that point.

``My views are also parallel to those of Pearson when it comes to the need to take tough measures to deal with substance abuse, particularly in relation to alcohol. Noel Pearson is a sophisticated thinker and communicator with a knack for presenting, in dramatic and confronting terms, some of the problems afflicting Aboriginal communities that we have known about for many years. That is all well and good but, when it comes to specific details of processes for formulating solutions for those problems, it does not help us in this place at all for the member for Katherine to quote selections from her greatest-hits archive of Noel's assorted media quotes and sound bites. In almost every instance, they deal with generalities not specifics. At the end of the day, Northern Territory problems need to be addressed by the implementation of customised Northern Territory solutions. Some aspects of the package of measures that Pearson has developed for Cape York may well be usefully imported here, while others may be a poor fit.

``By all means, let us look at the detail of what has been trialled in the Cape as one of a range of reference points but, in the meantime, let us can the Howard years of rhetoric, including the gospel according to St Noel."

A ``searing personal attack for his Lutheran upbringing"? I don't think so. Pearson rang me personally to express his disappointment about that speech, by the way. It was a civil conversation.

As for the suggestion that I have never read or understood any of Pearson's ``tracts", the following paragraph was part of a long article that I (unsuccessfully) submitted for publication about two years ago to *The Monthly* and *Quadrant*:

``And as it happens, Pearson's views in relation to at least three relevant matters largely coincide with my own. They are: (1) a no-tolerance approach to alcohol and substance abuse (see Pearson's Charles Perkins Oration, October 25, 2001, On the Human Right to Misery, Mass Incarceration and Early Death, and my published views as the former chairperson of the select committee on substance abuse in the community); (2) criteria for designing education programs aimed at both mainstream literacy and numeracy and the preservation of Aboriginal language (Pearson's Quarterly Essay 35, ``Radical Hope, Education and Equality in Australia", pp55-75, and my published views accessible on the National Indigenous Times website); (3) a belief in the maintenance of land rights as a ``necessary but by itself insufficient basis for the achievement of these hopes held in the past which failed to be fulfilled" (``Radical Hope, Education and Equality in Australia", p104, and various speeches I have made in parliament recorded on Hansard)."

Just in case the above paragraph may give the impression that I place myself in Pearson's league, I should also quote another sentence from that article: ``Given that (Nicolas) Rothwell has lamented the dearth of public intellectuals in the Territory, I should concede at the outset that Noel Pearson is a significant public intellectual of

substance whereas I have no profile or status in that regard."

I do not resile from the criticisms I have made about the role Pearson played in the Territory intervention's destructive one-size-fits-all ``blame-and-shame" regime, while negotiating and securing for his own people a reasonable and progressive fault-based policy reform. And his negative characterisation of the Community Development Employment Projects fails to acknowledge successful enterprises where CDEP funding comprises only part of a ``real" wage. But Pearson has always been fair in any dealings he has had with me. I cannot say the same of Langton.