

Pearson named Australian of the Year

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IN the early '90s, Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson was in tune with the times when he passionately argued that ownership of land was the basis of future Aboriginal advancement. In 2004, he was equally in tune with his times in promoting a greater self-reliance among Aboriginal people and encouraging practical measures to further the lot of Australia's indigenous people.

It is why Mr Pearson is The Australian's Australian of the Year.

In many ways, Pearson's personal journey has been the forerunner of the debate on the future of indigenous people. Pearson, 39, has been a force in Aboriginal affairs for 15 years, but his 2000 declaration that the traditional welfare state had failed Aboriginal people sparked an at times furious debate about the future direction for Australia's indigenous people and separated Pearson from a good deal of the rest of the Aboriginal leadership.

But this year saw Pearson's philosophic direction of more self-reliance and even acceptance of the principle of mutual obligation take a greater hold among Aboriginal Australia.

In particular there have been two specific events this year that have prompted The Australian to give Pearson this honour.

Firstly, Pearson was largely responsible for a rapprochement between the Aboriginal leadership and the federal Government which has resulted in a new-found commitment from John Howard to address Aboriginal issues.

Back in 1997, Pearson described the Howard Government as "racist scum", but since then has come to the practical conclusion that he needs to work with those in office if he is to achieve anything for Aboriginal people.

This was brought home strongly to Pearson after John Howard's election victory. Pearson's response was to organise a meeting of the Aboriginal leadership at Port Douglas, near Pearson's lands at Hopevale on Cape York, which focused not only on ways to connect with the federal Government but also corporate Australia and non-government organisations.

As part of that process he brought the Dodson brothers back into the tent. Pat Dodson had earlier described the Howard Government's policy of mutual obligation as "fascism gone mad", but in November this year, there he was, along with his brother Mick as well as Pearson, at the inaugural meeting of the National Indigenous Council, shaking hands with the Prime Minister and helping chart the path ahead.

Secondly, during the year Pearson focused on the basic building blocks of social progress, health and education. He advocated the radical solution of sending Aboriginal children out of their own communities to boarding schools to make sure they finished secondary schooling.

Pearson was roundly criticised for the proposal for advocating a 2000's version of the stolen generation -- his response was simply to point to the fact that on Cape York, only 6 per cent of Aboriginal students finished secondary school and only 150 out of 1500 eligible children were enrolled at secondary school.

There was a strong response to Pearson's acceptance from private schools, several of which offered scholarships to school children from Cape York after Pearson's appeal.

There is also a neat symmetry between Pearson and the only previous indigenous winner of the award, Eddie Mabo, who won it in 1992.

In Mabo's case that year the High Court declared the survival of native title. Australians understood that something dramatic had happened but many found the precise significance of Mabo elusive. Pearson was one of the judgment's earliest and most persuasive popularisers. He also grasped the reality that legal symbol had to be translated into practical politics and he played a central role in the deal-making that created the federal Native Title Act. It was possible in the early days of native title to imagine that land alone might solve the many problems confronting the Aboriginal people. Pearson knew more was needed.

Pearson will remain blissfully unaware of the award, as he is in a remote camp in the middle of Cape York on traditional tribal lands.

A family spokesman said he had a big year ahead of him, and wanted to spend some time "fishing and kicking back" with family members some 200km north of Cooktown on Cape York.

In 2004, he was again in tune with the times by being equally passionate in arguing that Aboriginal people needed to look to themselves and engage with the broader Australian community if they were to advance their lot, both socially and economically.

"We have to get on top of the grog problem, get the children healthy, and engage the parents to ensure attendance at school. If we don't demand better education, nothing will improve," he said this year when arguing for better education for Cape York people.

It might not have been the rhetoric of Noel Pearson, firebrand Aboriginal leader of the 1990s, but it was the right rhetoric for 2004 Australia