

Pearson hails most significant reform since war

By Tony Koch
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ABORIGINAL leader Noel Pearson yesterday hailed a \$48 million program aimed at wresting four Cape York communities from the grip of passive welfare as "the most significant reform in welfare since the Second World War".

Under the plan announced yesterday by Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough and Mr Pearson, the 3000 residents of four key Aboriginal communities on Cape York will have to accept responsibility for the healthy upbringing of their children, properly maintain and pay rent on their homes, and work to get off "sit-down money" welfare payments.

Failure to accept responsibility could result in having a significant portion of welfare payments made to individuals taken from them and managed by a responsible family or community member.

Mr Brough said that \$48 million had been allocated for the four-year trial at the Aurukun, Hopevale, Mossman Gorge and Coen communities, commencing early next year.

Under the plan, the Queensland Government will introduce legislation establishing a Family Responsibilities Commission to enforce the welfare obligations.

The commission would be chaired by a retired magistrate and include respected Aboriginal members of each of the four communities participating in the trial.

Mr Pearson explained that the commission would work with families and communities to deal with issues of drug and alcohol dependency, violence, child neglect and truancy, gambling and poor financial management.

The federal funding commitment was made after Mr Brough's cabinet colleagues accepted recommendations in a report titled *From Hand Out to Hand Up*, compiled by the Cape York Institute, which is headed by Mr Pearson.

Mr Pearson, who has fought for nine years for reform of what he calls "welfare passivity", said the Government's support for the institute's plan would allow comprehensive reforms to rebuild social norms and create incentives for economic development and growth in Cape York.

Mr Brough said the Government's support was "an expression of the overwhelming desire of people in Cape York to ensure their children grow up in a safe home, attend

school and enjoy the same opportunities as any other Australian child".

``The trials in these four communities aim to promote engagement in the real economy, reduce passive welfare and rebuild social norms, particularly as the affect the wellbeing of children.

``A major feature of the reforms is the introduction of a set of obligations attaching to welfare payments, which will require parents to send their children to school and protect them from harm and neglect.

``The housing reforms require tenants to comply with lease conditions.

``If people do not uphold the law, welfare sanctions may be introduced to those convicted of domestic violence, drugs or alcohol offences."

Mr Pearson was careful to emphasise that people would not have welfare money docked before a ``help" process, including interviews with relationships and violence counsellors and-or financial managers, was exhausted.

If recalcitrant or criminal conduct persisted, the Family Responsibilities Commission would determine whether there had been a breach of any of the ``obligations". The federal Government will amend legislation to enable Centrelink to redirect a person's welfare payments as directed by the commission.

The federal funding also provides for the establishment of a trust to assist parents to contribute to their children's education and, in some cases, to help send them away to secondary boarding colleges and university.

Mr Pearson said Hopevale was ``the best home in the world" when he was a child, despite being brought up in poverty.

``It's going to be a very rocky road," he said, ``but if we get these changes made, I believe that one day soon my community will have children who will look back on their childhood and say, `This is the best place in the world'."