

Pearson accuses Labor of betrayal

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Weekend Australian
24 November 2007

Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has accused Kevin Rudd of "an absolute betrayal" of indigenous Australia by his refusal to commit to the reconciliation referendum in his first term.

"For this betrayal, I dread a Rudd prime ministership," Mr Pearson said. "When will Rudd and (Wayne) Swan find the guts to deal with symbolic reconciliation? I regret that Mr Rudd has not changed from what I have long considered his innately contemptuous view of indigenous people and indigenous policy."

In an interview with *The Weekend Australian*, Mr Pearson said he felt "absolute devastation".

He accused the Opposition Leader of misleading the indigenous people during the campaign into believing that a Rudd government would put the referendum, which would vote on including recognition of indigenous Australians in the Constitution, in its first term. But Mr Rudd, in an interview published in *The Australian* yesterday, made clear this was not a priority. He refused to make any such commitment.

"For the duration of the campaign, I was satisfied we had a bipartisan commitment," Mr Pearson said. "So I kept my powder dry. Then 48 hours before the vote, I read that Rudd won't be putting the referendum if he wins. This is an absolute heartless abandonment of indigenous people. We have been misled. My reaction is one of absolute betrayal. This is not what they promised and we will hold them accountable."

The nub of Mr Pearson's argument is that John Howard set up the politics for the passage of the referendum but Labor has decided not to advance this opportunity.

The Prime Minister pledged a bill within 100 days of his re-election and a referendum within

18 months and insisted that he would persuade conservative Australians to carry the constitutional change. Quizzed about his message to Mr Rudd, Mr Pearson said: "It is that the quest for reconciliation must be an up-front part of the first-term agenda. We expect to see Rudd capitalise on and complete Howard's constitutional commitment. That's what we expect. Rudd should say he wants Australian conservatives to honour Howard's pledge. If you allow Howard's commitment to rot on the vine, then you cannot expect to get that support."

Mr Pearson highlighted the October 11 statement by Mr Rudd and Opposition

indigenous affairs spokeswoman Jenny Macklin that "Labor offers bipartisan support to a commitment for constitutional recognition, regardless of the outcomes of the federal election".

He took this as a firm sign of Labor's commitment to the referendum. Now it is apparent this is not a Rudd priority.

In his interview with The Australian Mr Rudd said: "From my point of view the key thing is closing the gap (between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal living standards) and the key to this is also to introduce policies that give effect to closing the gap.

"I am concerned about making advances on the practical front first. Let's take other things subsequent to that."

Mr Rudd's commitment to practical progress is virtually identical to the Howard agenda.

Mr Pearson told this newspaper that reconciliation must be both symbolic and practical. He said: "We got Howard to the point where he backed a symbolic agenda and Rudd is saying: 'No, let's just rewind the tape'."

Ms Macklin said yesterday that Labor policy was for a referendum to take place. There was no qualification about this. But Labor has not spelt out the timing. It may be tempting to think that timing is the problem but the depth of Mr Pearson's remarks signal a serious distrust of Mr Rudd and his attitude towards indigenous affairs.