

## **Quieter, greyer, but unbowed: Pearson fights on**

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IT has been a while since anyone has seen Noel Pearson and there is a reason for that -- he's had cancer. It's the curable kind, for which Pearson, now 47, is grateful, not least to the God he came to know as a barefoot boy growing up in a dusty town of Hope Vale in Queensland's Cape York.

The treatment regime hasn't been pleasant and in the absence of too many statements from Pearson himself, there has also been plenty of gossip as to the state he's in.

He's got no hair, one person tells me. He's got tubes hanging out of his chest. It's a blood cancer -- lymphoma -- that has left him feeling weak and shy about his appearance. He doesn't want to talk to anyone, and yet he has little choice because his illness could not have come at a worse time.

Four years ago, Pearson and his team at Cape York Partnerships pulled an audacious new welfare program together, for four Aboriginal communities in the Cape.

The \$74 million Cape York Welfare Reform Trial aims to force parents to send their children to school, or risk being roused on by elders -- and having their welfare cheques managed for them.

Opposition to the program is in some quarters bitter but Pearson has always stood ready to defend both method and cost. Then, in this fourth year of the four-year trial, with cautious gains having been made, he became seriously ill -- and into the vacuum his opponents have swarmed.

From the Cape down the Queensland coast to Canberra, debate is raging over the efficacy of Pearson's model; the accountability he offers; the amount he spends; the paternalism that underpins his ideology; and the sometimes brutal manner in which he deals with critics.

Pearson's supporters have urged him to speak up. It takes a month to organise an interview. Initially, it's only by phone but at the last minute he agrees to meet in the foyer of a Brisbane hotel, coming gingerly up the stairs from an underground carpark. He has lost some of his hair, and what's left has faded to silver (left to grow, he'd be one of those Aboriginal men with a shock of white on his head). His legs are a bit skinny. He still walks like an old cowboy.

Pearson takes a seat at a wonky table and coughs. He takes a Panadol, attempts to do so without water, in fact, until one of his entourage -- Pearson does not often travel

alone -- gets up to fetch a glass.

We talk for a couple of hours. It's tempting to say something twee -- the flesh is weak, but his spirit remains strong -- but, in fact, there's a touch of melancholy about Pearson's mood. Those who know him well say it was ever thus. It's a hard road that he chooses to walk -- Pearson is a pragmatist in a landscape populated by the bleeding heart -- and he's been in the fight of his life, but lest anyone think he's done, Pearson's not done.

``I might have been saying to people, we're never gonna get there," he says, shaking both his head and his index finger in a manner that has become his signature, ``but that's what I always say, when I'm rallying myself from despair to conviction."