

Why I continue to be inspired by Pearson

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Among those who want to influence indigenous affairs policies, Noel Pearson offers the only effective way forward

WISE elders taught me to recognise the tides of politics, the ebbs and flows of sentiment of the settler population towards the indigenous people. Sir Tipene O'Regan, the great chief of the Ngai Tahu, first pointed this out to me, and then there were Aboriginal elders who spoke to me when our situation seemed, for a time, to be absolutely hopeless.

The dark days of far-right demagogue Pauline Hanson's first electoral campaign were the low tide for a time.

Then Noel Pearson's book, *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, published in 2000, struck a chord with those sensible Australians who were grappling with the lack of common sense in both the left and the right-wing narratives about the past and future of Aboriginal people. But long before that, since I first met him in 1988, Pearson's clear thinking and refusal to accept the politically correct policy charade of separate and unequal development had been an inspiration to me.

I have supported Pearson in most of his endeavours, such as his opposition to "passive welfare", to the Community Development Employment Projects scheme, in his drive for high educational outcomes and his welfare reform approach. I served as the chairwoman of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership from its beginning for five years.

His decisive position, taken in 2000, on the role of passive welfare in creating and sustaining Aboriginal poverty and misery was the revolutionary policy catalyst that turned around the thinking of both sides of politics in Australia, and has influenced the policies of several consecutive federal and Queensland state governments since. Yet this has been the most difficult message for Aboriginal Australia and its rusted-on quasi-left "supporters" to hear.

Some will have forgotten Pearson's other great achievement: in 1992, he challenged the Keating government on the Mabo decision, and it was his brilliant legal analysis that gave Paul Keating and our people a rational approach to legislating for the protection and management of native title. He was younger and more eloquent than the most famous Aboriginal men and women who spoke to the world through the media; he has presented a public persona that beguiled prime ministers and labourers alike.

Pearson has also enraged Aboriginal people by tacking away from the cant of Aboriginal symbolic politics and arguing a powerful case for including indigenous people in the economic life of Australia. He has never resorted to street demonstrations, worn the Aboriginal flag colours or ranted the Aboriginal slogans invented in the 1960s and 70s.

His methods were borrowed from earlier, conventional political figures in history, and while a social democrat to the core, albeit one steeped in history and legal philosophy, his arsenal has consisted of eloquent English, sustained reason and argument, and an oratorical flourish that has bent to his cause the best minds of the most racist circles in Australian political life.

For this, Pearson is despised by Aboriginal apparatchiks in their taxpayer-supported sinecures throughout the country. The former deputy chief minister of the Northern Territory, Marion Scrymgour, an Aboriginal woman who ever so briefly held the highest office of any Aboriginal politician in Australian history, denounced him for his Christianity and, in a searing personal attack, for his Lutheran upbringing.

One of her proteges, Kim Hill, who at the time of writing holds the position of director of the Northern Land Council in the Northern Territory, once the most powerful of all Aboriginal organisations outside the federal capital, announced his political stance at a function in Darwin with these words: ``I am not Noel Pearson."

The audience was ecstatic and gave him a standing ovation. Of course, he was entirely innocent of any literary or historical referentialism in this declaration. His simple goal was to create the image of himself as the advocate for everything that Pearson was against. 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-wing blogs. But that is the case for most of those people who attack him. This tactic of demonising Pearson has been the crowd-pleaser in the Aboriginal industry for about a decade.

Despite the hatred of Pearson in the Aboriginal industry, there are now thousands of Australians from all walks of life, from corporate chief executives to labourers, who support him because his policies make sense. Occasionally, though, even his supporters turn against him. And this is what puzzled me about the opinion piece in *The Weekend Australian* of April 28-29, by Tony Koch.

I wrote to Pearson to ask him what he thought might be the reasons for this article by Koch and his reply is very instructive. Last year, he worked with staff and traditional owners from the Cape to develop a comprehensive strategy to counter the long-increasing threat to indigenous rights to hunt turtle and dugong. It culminated in a week-long workshop in Cairns in November, to which media was invited for a briefing. The *Australian* didn't turn up. The ABC and local rags then ran beat-ups about the ``slaughter".

This strategy work has subsequently been funded by Environment Minister Tony Burke for the second stage of developing local management plans. None of this has been covered by the media.

Pearson's brave opposition to the wild rivers legislation in Queensland is another matter in which I support him. His opposition to this legislation does not mean that he is not deeply concerned with environmental and biodiversity conservation.

On the contrary, he has been influential in ensuring that very large areas of Aboriginal land in Cape York Peninsula, including his own traditional land, have been dedicated to conservation and national park status.

This has been the case for 20 years, and, in my view, he has done more for real conservation in Cape York Peninsula than anyone else.

There has been a habit in the Australian media of reportage of Aboriginal people as dysfunctional, depraved and corrupt. At times, that seemed to be the only story, but gradually responsible journalists began to write about our successes, none greater than Pearson's agenda in Cape York.

For the past 20 years, Koch followed Pearson's progress and his reportage was mixed. As Pearson revealed some horrible aspect of the symptoms of welfare-dependency, Koch got the story. Corruption, depravity. Sometimes he covered the positive side. Clearly Koch had a role in informing Australians of Pearson's progress, but others dug more deeply and began to understand the critical importance of Pearson's thinking.

We have seen this in several feature articles, such as Nicolas Rothwell's work, and editorials of *The Australian*.

In his article, Koch advocated for Chris Sarra as a preferable Aboriginal leader to Pearson. Koch is free to prefer one Aboriginal person over another, but there is a danger in white patronage that I have learnt about the hard way.

An elder once explained to me why I should be careful of those white people who are too keen to help me, and also too keen to take the credit for my own work. They want to be seen as our masters, the puppeteers who pull our strings. It is a part of the old master-slave relationship that we Queenslanders are too familiar with. Aboriginal slavery in Queensland was a part of my life as a child and until my early adulthood. So, too, for Pearson, about which he has written.

Pearson is a leading Australian thinker and writer, and much of what he writes has nothing to do with Aboriginal affairs. He is a legal scholar and a historian.

It is not a matter of choosing between Sarra and Pearson, but between Pearson and Clive Hamilton or Robert Manne or some other intellectual luminary.

It is true that sometimes Pearson uses common Australian profanities when he is angry; so do most Australians, but especially Aboriginal people, who speak vernacular Aboriginal English. In Aboriginal English, as linguists have shown, common profanities are emphatics, like exclamation marks. It is also true that Pearson is driven, that he is vehement in his advocacy and expression of the issues that he has sacrificed his life for. This goes with the territory. Many leaders have these characteristics. The Anglo preference for supercilious politeness is the enemy

of people who want to make a radical change to improve the lives of others.

Pearson is human, although not typical. But there is an overriding issue: among all those who want to influence indigenous affairs policies, he offers the only effective way forward. If Aboriginal people do not take responsibility for their own lives and of their families they will be mendicants on the welfare system forever, with all the disadvantages that creates. I continue to be inspired by Pearson's fearless and brilliant approach to indigenous development.

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