

Noel Pearson's advice 'ignored' before Aurukun attack



Noel Pearson says the current Palaszczuk government, and the former government led by Campbell Newman, ignored the worsening dysfunction among teenagers. Picture: Britta Campion

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An axe-wielding mob attack by youths in the Aboriginal community of Aurukun this week, prompting an evacuation of teaching staff, came months after a scathing warning by Noel Pearson of the need for government action over growing youth violence on Cape York.

The indigenous leader, who championed welfare and alcohol crackdowns on Aboriginal communities, privately wrote to Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Minister Curtis Pitt in March accusing successive state governments of “weak or non-existent” responses to his pleas for action.

Mr Pearson says the current Palaszczuk government, and the former government led by Campbell Newman, ignored the worsening dysfunction among teenagers — estimated at about 100 in Aurukun — who do not attend school and are unemployed.

The issue exploded last Sunday when a group of teenagers attacked the home of several teachers, which later escalated into a confrontation with the local principal by teenagers — one of whom was brandishing an axe.

It followed months of unrest in the 1400-strong community.

Mr Pitt travelled yesterday to Aurukun, on the western side of Cape York, with senior police and independent local MP Billy Gordon for a meeting in which Mayor Derek Walpo called on the community to take responsibility for its problems. Mr Walpo said parents and local leaders should “be ashamed” for not policing their children and ridding the community of gambling, sly-grogging and drug-running.

“No one seems to know where their kids are after 6pm,” he said. “You should be ashamed of yourselves for not playing your part ... it’s more than a lack of respect and a lack of discipline. This is neglect.”

The community was the subject of the shocking 2013 Smallbone report — publicly released this year — which showed a worrying acceptance of “sexualised behaviours” among youths, including sexual threats and sexual assault.

As revealed by *The Weekend Australian* in 2014, the report also found the rate of sexually transmitted infections in Aurukun was 50 times the state average.

The township — which has a ban on the sale of alcohol — is one of four Cape York communities targeted in a state-federal welfare reform trial that has cost tens of millions of dollars.

While the trial, championed by Mr Pearson, led to improvements in school attendance and academic results, violence and substance abuse remain rampant. The trial’s successes have also been mitigated by the worsening youth problems.

Mr Pearson has repeatedly appealed to governments to tackle the problem, with targeted programs — including reinstating the successful “Boys from the Bush” initiative — in which teenagers leave the community to work and live under supervision.

In a March 8 letter sent to Mr Pitt before the latest violence, Mr Pearson said his calls had largely been ignored by the Newman and Palaszczuk governments. “The response from the Queensland government to the above has been either weak or non-existent,” he said in the letter co-authored by Cape York Partnership executive general manager Fiona Jose.

“We note that it is extraordinary that key pieces of correspondence on this serious issue went completely unanswered.

“We are years down the track and there is still no compelling plan from government, and there is still no clear policy to deal with the ongoing addiction epidemic in our communities or to build on the gains that were being made before the Newman-announced review.”

Mr Newman announced a review of decade-old alcohol restrictions on remote Aboriginal communities, which is ongoing under the Palaszczuk government.

Mr Pitt — who has set up a steering committee in the wake of the Smallbone report — issued a statement yesterday saying he remained committed to tacking the social dysfunction among youths.