

Get over historical indigenous wrongs: Noel Pearson

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Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has challenged indigenous Australians to get over their traumatic history in the same way that Jews survived the Holocaust.

Mr Pearson yesterday declared that alcohol was damaging indigenous communities far more than the past wrongs inflicted on Aborigines.

“I honestly believe people can rise above historic trauma, otherwise we’ll lose agency and we’re defeated by history,” he told the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists annual congress in Brisbane.

“I have to push back against too much attribution to past, to people’s present troubles. Whatever the scars and the burdens that people coming out of the Holocaust suffered, they nevertheless endured, and they laid foundations for their families.”

Mr Pearson said it was a “policy and leadership convenience” to blame the wrongs of the past — such as removing Aboriginal children from their parents — for the poverty, violence and disadvantage now rife in indigenous communities.

“I just see too much acquiescence and submission to history and the loss of agency in the present,” he said. “It is the trauma of the present ... that most engages me. The challenge we now face is 20 years of brutal trauma caused by an untrammelled alcohol binge.”

Mr Pearson, a lawyer and academic who founded the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, said alcohol and drugs had left a generation of “very damaged” parents who threatened the “beautiful green shoots” of indigenous children.

“The parents of the children at school now are very damaged,” he said. “We have cycles of offending and abuse of children and it’s hard to see how we are going to break the cycles.”

Mr Pearson condemned the decision 30 years ago by Queensland’s Bjelke-Petersen government to open an alcohol canteen in the remote Cape York community of Aurukun, against the protests of the community’s women and elders.

“The community received millions of dollars worth of unemployment benefits and the canteen was the means to convert those benefits into local government (revenue),” he said. “Literally the kidneys and livers and bodies of the Wik people became a means of laundering commonwealth funds into operational funds for local government.”

Mr Pearson said indigenous people needed jobs and ambition to lift themselves out of poverty and disadvantage. However, he added, “the minute a black person shows a sign of accumulating wealth, there’ll be more controversy over that than anyone else owning a Mercedes”.

“It makes it very hard for people to progress and we end up in a situation where our young people are equivocal about whether they should be materialistic and whether they should work and be paid for it, or be consultants, or pursue professions,” he said.

Mr Pearson said “lower-class people” were told it was somehow selfish to act in self-interest. “Yet the rest of us wake up every morning with self-interest right under our noses,” he said.

“It is the liberal idea of self-interest ... and the jealous pursuit of something better for themselves and their children that is the engine of development. We want something better for ourselves and our children, but when it comes to the disadvantaged we think the right policy is charity and that we have to save them.”

Mr Pearson said welfare dependence had created an industry of white workers to service indigenous people trapped on the dole. “We now have multinational corporations that deliver work-for-the-dole programs in remote communities, painting rocks,” he said. “We’ve constructed a major industry out of indigenous disadvantage. Australia spent \$33 billion last year in the name of indigenous people ... yet the results are the poorest you can imagine.”

Mr Pearson said white Australia believed indigenous people had a “right to welfare”.

“All of the middle-class people on good salaries with good homes and their children in good schools are telling my mob we have a right to live at the bottom,” he said.

“Don’t tell me we have a right to \$15,000 a year down at the bottom. What kind of a right is that? We have a right to a job.

“But too many white Australians think the door opens to opportunity from the outside, when you’ve got to be let into the door from the inside.”

Mr Pearson said constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as Australia’s first inhabitants would be “psychologically liberating”.

“You know, this is our country too,” he said.