

Noel Pearson: I Have Another Dream. Thankfully, It's An Hour Shorter

By New Matilda
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Last week, Cape York lawyer Noel Pearson gave what many in the media have dubbed the greatest political speech in Australia's history.

The platitudes from the nation's journalists rained down like manna from heaven.

The Australian's Patricia Karvelas lead the sycophantic charge, gushing on Twitter: "Pearson's speeches are like songs" and "Noel Pearson should have been Prime Minister".

Fairfax's Peter Fitzsimmons was a close second, writing in his column "it really was the oration of a lifetime, superbly crafted, magnificently delivered".

Sky News' David Speers wrote "two best speeches I've seen this year: Pearson at the Oz's 50th and Pearson at Whitlam memorial".

The Australian's Natasha Robinson wrote on Twitter "I don't want to go overboard, but have you heard anything quite like this?"

Well, yes we have. And from no less than Pearson himself.

Pearson's 'soaring', 'superbly crafted' speech was lifted almost word for word, with a few slight changes of phrase, from the annual Whitlam oration which he delivered last year, a fact acknowledged in the introduction, and lost in the fawning.*

The original hour-and-a-half long speech was simply repackaged and recycled, then condensed into a 20-minute 'lite' version for the nationally-televised eulogy last week.

The title of his original, now year-old, speech was in fact the first line of his eulogy, a Paul Keating quote: “the reward for public life is public progress”.

Pearson even recycles his now famous “What did the Romans ever do for us” Monty Python reference.

It’s hard to imagine Martin Luther King Jnr having two dreams. It’s hard to imagine Paul Keating declaring again “it was us who did the dispossessing”. It’s even harder to imagine Jesus delivering ‘Sermon on the Mount Mark II’. And it’s almost impossible to imagine any other public intellectual plagiarising himself and then accepting platitudes for it.

But of course, that was not the only problem with the speech.

The fact Pearson is a great orator is not news to black Australia. He is renowned for it, and there is even a begrudging respect for it. Regardless of the deep anger felt towards Pearson for his ideologies, there is often an acknowledgement from his detractors that he is an excellent speaker.

It's hard to rationalise the 'public Pearson' with the 'private potty mouth Pearson' that Aboriginal Australians know so well. He's a very different 'speaker' when the cameras aren't on him. But that's another story for another day.

Without doubt, he's great with words when he needs to be. And there were times when this talent was used to campaign on behalf of Aboriginal people. In 1997, at the Reconciliation Conference in Melbourne, Pearson got up before a stadium full of blackfellas, and calmly, eloquently tore into Prime Minister John Howard for his horrendous Ten Point Plan aimed at watering down the already weak provisions of the Native Title Act.

It was at this same conference that attendees stood up and turned their backs on the Prime Minister, as he stood yelling indignantly from his pulpit, trying to sell his full-scale assault on native title to a room full of blackfellas at a reconciliation conference, to appease pastoralists and miners.

Pearson’s pattern of speech was less pompous back then, more grassroots, just as suited to speaking to blackfellas whilst sitting in the dust as it was to speaking to big politicians. It was less white.

He stood facing the Prime Minister on behalf of those who had turned their backs.

In pointed barbs to Howard, Pearson told the crowd “I don’t think Australia at this juncture have the leadership to take us to reconciliation in 2001, regrettably.

“There are questions here at stake that are bigger than the small hearts that have concocted the ten point scam. They are, we must never forget, only the government of the day. They are not God.”

And just as the government of the day is not God, Pearson is not the messiah for Aboriginal people, regardless of whether his disciples in white media write him as such. His word is not gospel.

Pearson has changed a great deal since the heady days of ‘reconciliation’, although it was around that time that he his thinking – and his public pronouncements – began to change. He started to advance theories on the evils of passive welfare, the importance of personal responsibility, and the need to redirect government policy away from talk of self-determination and the importance of Aboriginal people controlling their own affairs.

That is, of course, now what Pearson is most famous for. Despite his “tough love” approach to welfare, showcased in his Cape York Welfare Reform trials, there is very little in the way of evidence that it’s changing social norms.

So whilst non-Indigenous Australia was almost unanimous in its praise for Pearson’s Whitlam eulogy, the reaction from Aboriginal Australia was very, very different. It always is.

A case in point is the day after the Whitlam memorial, when Pearson gave a public lecture at the Queensland Conservatorium in Brisbane. The footage of the speech was captured by the ABC.

The video shows Pearson being interrupted by a Murri man in the crowd.

“You’re talking s**t. You’re standing here talking up like you support all the black people in this country. You do not. You do not. You do not,” the man says angrily.

“You do not speak for me and my family... and you’re standing here... speaking like you are the chosen voice. You are not the chosen voice.”

An audience member tells the man – one of only a few Aboriginal attendees in an all-white crowd – to “show some respect”.

“I show some respect by renouncing him,” the Murri man responds.

“Because he doesn’t speak for me.”

Pearson, almost lost for words, says: “I’ve never claimed to speak on behalf of anyone.”

The Murri man replied: “You do every time you open your mouth. You are chosen by white people to sit in this audience and speak on behalf of black people.

“You’ve got no right to do that. Standing there like you’re a big strong black man. You’re not a strong black man, no way in the world.”

At this point, the man walked out, and when his nephew tried to clarify his statements, he was admonished by the organiser of the lecture.

“Can I just bring the house to order,” the white man told the crowd. “We have a public lecture”.

When the Murri man’s nephew tries to interject the white man cuts him off “Sorry can you let me finish?”

He continued: “Hosted by the university where we’ve invited... in the interests of intellectual debates and a chance for us to pursue Indigenous social justice... but with people being given the chance to speak. I ask us to all let the speaker give his presentation and that will be followed by a Q&A.”

At this, there was immediate applause from the white audience.

And that, in a nutshell, explains the whole debate, and Aboriginal Australia’s frustration.

Pearson is allowed to give his view because it is a view point accepted by white Australia, who are mostly interested in hearing their version of “Indigenous social justice”.

“Intellectual debates” are allowed to be had within the parameters set by non-Indigenous Australia. Anyone who upsets that is told to leave, or is paternalistically told to “show some respect”, as if their opinions are less valid in the face of an anointed prophet.

If the audience at Pearson’s last public lecture wanted to have a truly “intellectual debate” about “pursuing Indigenous social justice”, a far more enlightening method would have been letting the man with little voice have a say against the man with the big voice.

And it’s the ‘big voice’ who repeats the same tired things, who not only recycles his lines from one speech to another, but who continues this rhetoric on “tough love”, just as Aboriginal children kill themselves, as our people are locked up at world record rates, and as we have our culture and identity demoralised and disempowered at every turn, as we lose our voice and our right to have our opinions counted.

The most disturbing part of Pearson’s Whitlam oration was its hypocrisy. Pearson paid tribute to Whitlam’s role in designing the Racial Discrimination Act, praising the act that helped cushion the High Court Mabo win, which led to Native Title law.

But he does not mention his own hypocrisy in paving the way for the Northern Territory intervention, which required the Howard government to bypass the RDA to pass racist laws without free, prior and informed consent from those it would affect.

The only reason you would need to bypass the RDA is if you are trying to pass laws that are racially discriminatory.

Pearson says in his eulogy that the Whitlam Government’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Queensland Discriminatory Laws Act ensured the state was “now required to treat Aboriginal Queenslanders on the same footing as other Australians”.

“We were at last free from those discriminations that humiliated and degraded our people”.

So why didn’t Pearson speak up against those discriminations when he was the only Aboriginal leader given any notice of the NT intervention, the most discriminatory piece of legislation in living memory, one plank of which – compulsory income management – was loosely based on his own welfare reform trials in Cape York? Reform trials, it’s worth noting, which were introduced by Pearson without the informed consent of his own people.

The NT intervention legislation assumed Aboriginal men in the Territory were child molesters, declared Aboriginal families incapable of managing their money, considered communities deserving of blanket pornography and alcohol bans... even the communities that were already dry.

Signage banning alcohol and pornography was put out the front of 73 prescribed Aboriginal communities, and stigmatised all those living in those communities, simply on the basis of their Aboriginality.

Why didn't Pearson condemn an intervention which led to a quadrupling in attempted suicide and self-harm rates, a massive increase in alcohol-related violence, a 90 per cent jump in Indigenous incarceration rates?

Despite special powers, the Australian Crime Commission found no evidence of paedophile rings, the original lie that paved the way for the intervention. Meanwhile, the demonization, the humiliation, the degradation of Aboriginal men, women and children is still being felt today.

Aboriginal people, unlike the mainstream media, do not have the memories of gold fish. Just as Pearson remembers his family's own racially discriminatory treatment under Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Aboriginal people will long remember their treatment under 'Pearson's Law'.

They also do not swallow hypocrisy.

That's regardless of how nice it sounds, and how many times you repeat it.