



OVERLAND 200

spring 2010

published 4 September 2010

Telling whites what they want to hear

Chris Graham *on the trouble with Noel Pearson*

For a student of history, Noel Pearson seems to devote an awful lot of time to forgetting the past.

In a landmark speech in 2000, in which Pearson signalled his transition from land rights activist to conservative power broker, he unloaded on the evils of passive welfare, blaming hard-won human rights for ruining black lives:

The irony of our newly won citizenship in 1967 was that after we became citizens with equal rights and the theoretical right to equal pay, we lost the meagre foothold that we had in the real economy and we became almost comprehensively dependent upon passive welfare for our livelihood. So in one sense we gained citizenship and in another sense we lost it at the same time. Because we find thirty years later that life in the safety net for three decades and two generations has produced a social disaster.

The speech was somewhat unimaginatively entitled 'The Light on the Hill' and was delivered as the Ben Chifley Memorial Lecture, a homage to one of Australia's great social reformers.

He delivered a characteristically verbose final line: 'Those of us who wish for social progress must realise that there are important insights in the materialist interpretation of our history and our culture, which the labour movement unfortunately left behind in favour of the confusions that have preoccupied and diverted those academics, bureaucrats and parliamentarians who became the intellectual trustees of the Welfare State and the interests of working people and their families – a responsibility which they grievously failed to fulfil.'

Translation: governments fucked up by giving the blacks too much welfare money with no strings attached.

At the time, it was a new theory for Pearson. Now, of course, it's well worn – the thinking that he's most famous for.

Broadly, Noel Pearson believes that the provision of a fortnightly pay packet with no expectation of anything in return is killing Aboriginal people. The free ride inevitably

leads Aboriginal people, including mothers and fathers, to drugs and alcohol. Social norms in Aboriginal communities are subverted. Aboriginal people are locked out of the 'real economy' and into a cycle of dysfunction, abuse and early death. Grog and ganja become the problem, rather than just the symptoms of the bigger problems of dispossession and unemployment.

By and large, you won't get much argument from Aboriginal leaders about the central themes of this thesis. But where Pearson and most of the rest of the Aboriginal leadership part company is on how black Australia got there, who is responsible and, most importantly, how we fix it.

Which brings us back to Pearson's grasp of history.

Pearson, most would know, has a law degree (from the University of Sydney). But before that, he was a history honours student. So his musings about the 1967 referendum unleashing welfare hell on Aboriginal people are a little puzzling, in part because of their inaccuracy, but also because of their silliness.

Firstly, Aboriginal people did not win the theoretical (or practical) right to equal pay in 1967, especially not in Queensland. The 1967 referendum included them in the census, effectively making them citizens of the country. It wasn't until the passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* that they were granted 'theoretical' rights to equal pay. And even then, it's not how it worked in practice. The Palm Island award wages case – which saw seven black government workers take the Bjelke-Petersen government to court demanding equal pay – wasn't settled until 1986 (Bjelke-Petersen responded with mass black sackings so that his government never had to increase funding to black communities).

Secondly, Aboriginal people have never been a part of the real economy, 'meagre foothold' or otherwise. They were a part of the slave economy. There's quite a difference.

And thirdly, drug and alcohol addiction – an almost inevitable by-product of welfare dependency, says Pearson – may well be bad for you, but then so is slavery.

The point being, the suggestion that theoretical equal rights for Aboriginal people started them on a slide to moral oblivion is simplistic nonsense. The slide to death, disease and destruction began in 1788. Any other characterisation completely ignores the real history of Aboriginal people – in particular people from Pearson's Cape York region.

But we'll come back to that.

Pearson grew up in the small community of Hope Vale, a former Lutheran mission about 400 kilometres north of Cairns.

Controlled in typical Lutheran fashion, Hope Vale was a very strict mission, with successive pastors ruling over the community with an iron fist. One of them, the ironically named Georg Schwarz (German for black), stayed for 55 years, later returning to the community to apologise for his management style.

Pearson missed most of it (and all of Schwarz's rule), having been born in 1965. But the Lutheran upbringing had a profound effect. After completing his matriculation at a boarding school in Brisbane, Pearson passed history and law in Sydney, before cutting his teeth on land rights with a stint at renowned Melbourne law firm Arnold Bloch Leibler. During university, Pearson founded the Cape York Land Council, which later afforded him a key role as one of the negotiators around the *Native Title Act 1993* that followed the Mabo High Court win. Although Pearson was a rising star in the black rights set at this time, most white Australians had never heard of him – nor Hope Vale for that matter.

He finally garnered mainstream attention in 1997 on the back of a stunning speech at the Australian Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne. The event played host, infamously, to a red-faced John Howard, who stood before hundreds of Aboriginal people banging his fist on the lectern and shouting at guests about the true history of a proud Australia. There were many dignified black responses that day, Pat Dodson's in particular. But none was as eloquent or as powerful as Pearson's:

It is a troubling business coming to terms with our history, both for Aboriginal people and for non-Aboriginal people. For our people, it is a troubling business because there's the imperative of never allowing anybody to forget the truths of the past, but being able as a community to rise above its demoralising legacy, and to reach for the future.

But it's also a challenge for non-Aboriginal Australia. A challenge to understand that in the same way as they urge pride in Gallipoli, and in Kokoda, and in many of these tragic aspects of the colonial past, and the national past, in the same way as you are able to urge contemporary pride in those events, can we as a community and as a nation also acknowledge the shameful aspects of that same past.

I don't think we in Australia, at this juncture, have the leadership to take us to reconciliation in 2001, regrettably.

It was the making of a man. But within three years, Pearson would embrace the very prime minister he'd trashed on a national stage.

His 'The Light on the Hill' speech three years later was seen by many black colleagues as a betrayal of the Aboriginal rights agenda. Pearson's solutions revolve primarily around government intervention and punitive responses to bad behaviour. It's all very, well, Lutheran. If a parent doesn't ensure their child goes to school, then Pearson advocates the government using whatever leverage to change the behaviour. If that parent is receiving welfare assistance, then it should be stopped.

Pearson doesn't like harm-minimisation programs either, which seek to prevent injury of drunk and drug-affected people rather than to stop them using. He's even criticised school breakfast programs. His theory: if you provide a free breakfast for kids, it becomes the social norm, and there's an ongoing expectation that the breakfast will be free. So Pearson's solution is to provide the program but charge the parents for the child's breakfast, and to do so as a mandatory deduction from their fortnightly Centrelink entitlement.

More broadly, Pearson doesn't – as he says himself – like the solutions put forward by 'progressives'. What he does like are precisely the same policies governments were advancing in the early 1900s: government control and intervention in black lives – the same policies his Lutheran masters pursued.

And he's using the same justification to push for it – the need to save the children.

Pearson stands accused of many sins within Indigenous affairs. Critics claim that he plays to the rednecks. He's also regularly accused of cherry-picking from the past, particularly when there's an opportunity to target 'progressive thinking'. The facts sometimes get in the way, so Pearson leaves them out.

From his 'The Light on the Hill' speech:

Take for example the problem of Indigenous imprisonment. Like a broken record over the past couple of decades we have been told that 2 per cent of the population comprise more than 30 per cent of the prison population. The situation with juvenile institutions across the country is worse. Of course these are incredible statistics. The progressive response to these ridiculous levels of interaction with the criminal justice system has been to provide legal aid to Indigenous peoples charged with offences. The hope is to provide access to proper legal defence and to perhaps reduce unnecessary imprisonment. To this day, however, Aboriginal victims of crime – particularly women – have no support: so whilst the needs of offenders are addressed, the situation of victims and the families remains vulnerable. Furthermore, it is apparent that this progressive response – providing legal aid support services – has not worked to reduce our rate of imprisonment.

The rate has never been 30 per cent (it's closer to 20 per cent). But regardless, Pearson's argument could be straight out of the mouth of Alan Jones, albeit presented with a little more sophistication. He's suggesting that the only response to black crime has been to help black criminals, while ignoring black victims – the women and children.

The claims are populist, cheap and, of course, complete rubbish.

Aboriginal legal aid has been grossly underfunded since the early 90s. Indeed, it received its first boost in funding in more than fifteen years at the federal budget handed down in May. But, a paucity of resources aside, to suggest that legal aid was the only 'progressive' response to Aboriginal incarceration is utterly ridiculous.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody handed down 339 recommendations, including calls for improved housing and infrastructure. Seventeen of the recommendations related to self-determination. The problem is that the promised response by government never came. How that is the fault of 'progressive thinking' is anyone's guess.

The most consistent criticism you will hear of Pearson from Aboriginal people, however, is that he speaks for other people's country. He has an unfortunate habit of endorsing one-size-fits-all solutions for Aboriginal people in other parts of the nation

if the political winds suit, although he doesn't necessarily believe that what is good for the goose is good for the gander.

When the federal Opposition floated the idea in 2008 of extending the Northern Territory intervention – a policy that Pearson backed – into Queensland, Pearson was apoplectic. He told media that it would ruin the reforms already underway in Cape York. Those reforms, interestingly, were far less punitive than the ones Pearson was backing under the intervention.

In July 2007, a month after Indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough sent in the army to remote Northern Territory communities, ABC's *Four Corners* reported on a program that Brough was planning to unveil in Hope Vale with Pearson. The trial, which involved committing to sending your children to school, was voluntary, with people rewarded for good behaviour by access to new housing.

By contrast, Aboriginal people living under the Northern Territory intervention had their land summarily seized, regardless of their behaviour.

Pearson was the first and most important black leader to lend his name to the Northern Territory intervention. It will haunt him for many years to come, because anytime a government proposes to spend a billion dollars – and that's what the intervention has cost so far – the public expects results.

Yet the Northern Territory intervention – modelled, say Pearson and Brough, on the Cape York reforms – has been an unmitigated disaster. A progress report released late last year by the Rudd government revealed that school attendance had actually dropped since the intervention was launched. But violence had increased, as had suicides. A \$670 million housing program that had expended almost \$150 million had provided no new housing. And there was no evidence of widespread sexual abuse of Aboriginal children, the very reason for the intervention in the first place.

New Indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin tried to claim one positive – the compulsory income management regime, which Pearson had particularly lauded, was working well. The consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables, we were told, was through the roof.

But a report compiled for the federal government by the Menzies School of Health Research showed Macklin's claims were bunkum: there was no evidence of an increase in the consumption of fresh food under the intervention. Quite the contrary, there was substantial evidence of an increase in the sale of junk food.

Unfortunately, things aren't much better in Cape York. Last year, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University released a groundbreaking study entitled 'Ranking regions: Revisiting an index of relative Indigenous socioeconomic outcomes'. Author Dr Nicholas Biddle ranked Aboriginal populations around the nation according to their relative disadvantage, based on employment, housing and educational data from the 2001 and 2006 censuses.

Biddle was able to paint a picture of how communities fared over the ensuing five years. Under Pearson's leadership, the community of Hope Vale went backwards,

from a ranking of 378 in 2001, to 426 in 2006. That's despite millions of dollars in additional funding pouring into Cape York, thanks in no small part to the powerful advocacy of Pearson.

And there are other complications with Pearson outcomes.

For a little over a year, a trial has been underway in four Cape York communities – Aurukun, Mossman Gorge, Coen and Pearson's home town of Hope Vale. A key part of the trial revolves around education and is overseen by a new Pearson-inspired body, the Family Responsibilities Commission. The FRC is made up of a chief commissioner (a white magistrate) and local elders from across the region (twenty-four in total). One of the FRC's key jobs is to help get kids to school. It does this by collaring parents when a child racks up more than three unexplained absences from school in a single term. The commission has the power to restrict the parents' access to their welfare entitlements, although in practice it prefers to refer people to social services. Punitive action is seen as a last resort.

Late last year, school attendance at Aurukun jumped from an average of 37 per cent to 63 per cent. At Mossman Gorge it increased from 61 per cent to 82 per cent. An ebullient Pearson told ABC radio: 'I am very pleased with the increased rate of school attendance and the general progress that the Family Responsibilities Commission is making.'

But there were a few hitches.

At Hope Vale attendance actually dropped by less than 1 per cent (to around 86 per cent). At Coen it was down from 97 per cent to 94 per cent. Pearson dismissed the figures on the basis that attendance was already above the state average and that the community was very small, so relatively few absences could skew the results.

But if Coen was above the state average, why hold the trial there? And it's noteworthy that Pearson dismisses the Coen figures on the grounds the sample is too small, but embraces the Mossman Gorge results. Mossman Gorge is even smaller than Coen.

Fiddle aside, the results at Aurukun – a population of around 1000 – are irrefutably impressive.

But, of course, there's another hitch.

While Pearson's trial has been running in Aurukun, Dr Chris Sarra, a respected Aboriginal educationalist, has also been working with the local school. Sarra has a history of spectacular and unparalleled gains in school attendance – while he was principal of the school at Cherbourg, a tough Aboriginal community in south-east Queensland, he cut absenteeism rates by 94 per cent. And he was having none of Pearson's very public victory lap.

'If you focus on Aurukun, there are serious questions there about whether the improvement in attendance is the result of welfare reforms or whether it's the result of the injection or the investment in quality leadership and quality teaching that's occurred there,' Sarra told ABC Radio.

‘The stronger, smarter way is about ... developing exciting school cultures that embrace the positive sense of Aboriginal student identity; it’s about working collaboratively and respectfully with communities; it’s about high expectations leadership for high expectations classrooms with high expectations teacher-student relationships.’

The jury is still out on the FRC trials, although the betting black man has his money on Sarra. Either way, the trials are far less punitive than Pearson has advocated in the past.

Whatever you think of Pearson’s politics, it almost certainly doesn’t match what Pearson thinks of Pearson’s politics.

Since his transformation in 2000, Pearson has been asserting that he’s not a conservative. Again, from his ‘The Light on the Hill’ speech: ‘Much of my thinking will seem to many to indicate that I have merely become conservative. But I propose the reform of welfare, not its abolition.’ And he was still running the line seven years later. Writing in the *Australian* in July 2007, Pearson says: ‘My aim has been, as Dennis Glover wrote in *The Australian* yesterday, to “set higher standards for the Left” by critically examining the outcomes of ostensibly leftist policies.’

Pearson seems to be suggesting that he is above politics, that he transcends it. He seems to be saying, ‘I’m not right-wing. I just happen to support the Northern Territory intervention. And I agree with compulsory income management. And I want to mine Cape York.’

It’s obviously pretty silly stuff, but Pearson gets away with it because his politics and his process suits the missionary zeal of governments and media. Most of all, Pearson tells white Australia what they want to hear: we don’t want to know that Aboriginal people are living short lives of misery and abject poverty, and that we’re responsible for it. We want to hear that we’re doing our best to save the unsaveables, and that the demise of Aboriginal people is really their own fault.

It plays out well on ‘Struggle Street’, and Pearson’s political stocks soar. But, of course, he doesn’t get away with it in the parts of our nation that are really struggling – Aboriginal communities.

And therein lies his biggest problem.

While I don’t doubt for one second Pearson’s love of his people or his genuine desire to save them from oblivion, I have major reservations about his ability. The problem for Pearson is surprisingly simple: he couldn’t lead his way out of a wet paper bag.

Sarra, by contrast, is immensely popular among Aboriginal Australians. He achieved his remarkable results in Cherbourg without vast rivers of government funding, without media hype and without alienating the very people he was trying help. He did it simply by engaging with the community. By building pride. By leading.

Pearson has spent more than a decade trying to achieve the same thing by bludgeoning and lecturing, bullying and bulldozing. Too much stick, not enough

carrot, one might say. His public pronouncements that lay the blame at the feet of Aboriginal people, his lauding of a prime minister who used race as a wedge, his support for atrocious human rights abuses like the Northern Territory intervention have all combined to leave Pearson out in the dark in Indigenous affairs.

He is, by quite some margin, the most loathed man in black affairs. It's a fact Pearson himself acknowledged in a recent interview, describing the perception of him among black Australians as 'the antichrist'.

I think he's being generous.

Pearson has, reportedly, learnt some valuable lessons about engaging with communities in the course of the FRC trials. But a conservative never changes his spots easily, and certainly not quickly.

In his 'The Light on the Hill' speech Pearson stated, 'When I consider the history of [white] people, I am struck by the ironies. Few Australians today appreciate their history.'

Reading the speech, I was struck by 'the ironies' as well.

Pearson studied history at university. He's well read on the vagaries of the labour movement since Federation. He's a scholar of American and Australian political history and he can tell you all about Siegfried Engelmann's theories of Direct Instruction education.

But I wonder if he's read Dr Rosalind Kidd's *The Way We Civilise*, a book which lays bare the horrendous brutality and wage theft levelled against Aboriginal people on Queensland missions. I wonder if he's read Marjorie Woodrow's *Long Time Coming Home*, which documents the cruelty of the Cootamundra Girls Home in NSW.

The fact is Pearson is a student of history who knows very little about his own. And if he understood it better, he wouldn't be so alienated from the people he wants to help.

Born black but raised Lutheran, Pearson will never lead Cape York out of the darkness of welfare dependency until he learns to accept personal responsibility for his own 'grievous failing': a complete lack of authenticity in the eyes of his people.

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[Overland 200-spring 2010](#), pp. 6–13