

# Noel Pearson's hunt for the 'radical centre' is doomed

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*Noel Pearson spoke of his hunt for the radical centre in his address to the National Press Club. Photo: Josh Robenstone*

A shifting centre offers no foundation for sound Indigenous affairs policy.

In his recent address to the National Press Club, Noel Pearson again referred to his hunt for the radical centre. Pearson is aiming for a window between left and right, marshalling an amalgam of liberalism, conservatism and social democracy. But his hunt is doomed because this is a shifting centre without ground, especially in Aboriginal Australia.

Australian politics can be a capricious business. Policy backflips and timid debate are our daily bread. Apparently deeper ideological commitments are mobile too. Across a range of policy areas, left and right are mobile, with both significantly departing from their ideological commitments of the 1970s.

Where, then, lies Pearson's vaunted radical centre? As the boundaries of left and right move, so too must Pearson's centre. It loses traction, and cannot hold. The truth is that this centre can never be radical because it has no foundation. This is why there is no adequate answer to the question: "What does the radical centre stand for?" No values can be specified for the

centre because its content remains held in suspension between a mobile left and right.

Because Pearson's centre has no content of its own it becomes subject to, and contained by, the shifting whims of mainstream Australian politics. His search leads him to scabble among ideological preferences set within the western political tradition. Pearson's oratory makes the centre and the process for finding it sound grand, but it is merely a fraught compromise between left and right framed by the asymmetric dynamics of settler-colonialism.

Pearson's approach masks the fact that historical compromises between left and right have both dispossessed Aboriginal people and generated the very policy crisis that he seeks to address. Key policies such as protection and assimilation were in their time bold leaps of the types Pearson prescribes. But by neglecting relations between Aboriginal people and the dominant order, Pearson continues a pattern of working within the effects of settler-colonial power dynamics rather than engaging with them.

Pearson's claimed innovations work only with ideas that originally came on boats with settlers. In the present these ideas continue the displacement of Aboriginal people by speaking directly to settler heritage. Aboriginal difference does not and cannot register in this heritage or in Pearson's radical centre. Aboriginal people have been invited to join a political order, not to be a party to constructing one.

Building an Australia that addresses pressing challenges in Indigenous affairs and responds adequately to Australian colonialism requires more than operating on the terms set by only one party to the black-white relationship. To work within the routinised contests of only one political system is no foundation for a post-colonial settlement because it is no basis for an exchange between peoples and traditions.

By operating through settler politics, Pearson denies Aboriginal people a history other than as defined by colonialism. A shifting centre suspended between left and right offers no foundation for quality Indigenous affairs policy and no basis for building a nation for the 21st century.

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