

## Politics blamed for hasty embrace of Pearson plan

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Changes in the welfare system and the Howard Government's intervention in the Northern Territory are based on an ailing trial that has been misrepresented in reports by the Cape York leader Noel Pearson, a former employee with the team undertaking the trial says.

But the Government forged ahead with the changes regardless because it wanted to act on July 1 in the lead-up to the impending federal election, said Philip Martin, who worked as a families officer in Aurukun for six months with Mr Pearson's Cape York Partnerships.

Aurukun is one of four north Queensland Aboriginal communities involved in Mr Pearson's welfare reform trial, which has pioneered a "tough love" approach of managing the welfare money of parents who neglect their children or fail to send them to school.

Mr Martin said political pressure from the Government had undermined the project, which is the ostensible basis for welfare changes in the Northern Territory - rules that are to be extended to all parents who receive welfare payments.

Aurukun now wants out of the trial but is trapped, he said, and Mr Pearson's report on the success of the programs "barely cites the actual research conducted with real people within the welfare reform pilot communities".

"I walked out [in May] because the project was a sham. It was only a veneer of community consultation," Mr Martin said.

Mr Martin is the first Cape York employee to speak about the effect of political pressure on the project.

Five months into a two-year project, he said, the project was beset by "a profound ambivalence towards community partners in the project, a willingness by Noel to invest the Aboriginal people of Cape York into his untested vision of social reform, and . . . a high level of collusion between the federal Coalition's election cycle planning and Noel's welfare reform pilot".

He said his research had been twisted beyond recognition to win federal funding and to suit the Government's election strategy.

"This research now supposedly underpins Cape York Institute's major policy

platform, From Hand Out to Hand Up," Mr Martin said.

"I say supposedly, as information collected during my time in Aurukun is everywhere inferred but is in no way explicit in the document. This has political and practical implications, saying nothing of its ethical breaches to the people who provided it.

"If you read the policy paper - a suite of policy design recommendations backed by the research I and seven others did, but re-packaged and often unrecognisable - you'd think the welfare reform agenda responds to community-identified issues, and is being called for by community members themselves. This is not quite the case."

As a result of the political pressure on the trial some key reservations about the proposals were ignored, Mr Martin said, including that domestic violence could increase if mothers had their family tax benefits A and B cut for their children's truancy, because male family members also relied on that money.

The reports should have contained a caveat saying that Mr Pearson's welfare reforms were suited to regional but not remote communities, he said. "In Aurukun, which is the only remote pilot community that bears any resemblance to the remote NT communities, it has been an abject failure."

In a March 20 email, following a visit by the Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, the project manager, Stephen Iles, wrote to team members to reassure them their trial had not been hijacked by the Government.

"While the timing of the proposal takes advantage of the minister's desire for change and the likely timing of the next federal election, it is a strong endorsement of the quality of your work to date," he wrote.

But team members were "outraged" at the Government's interference and their lack of input, Mr Martin said - and were again upset with the From Hand Out to Hand Up report.

Mr Martin said the report "barely cites the actual research conducted with real people within the welfare reform pilot communities".

Mr Brough received that report on June 19, describing it as "a high-quality report" which the Government would closely examine. Two days later, he and the Prime Minister, John Howard, announced the radical federal intervention in the Territory.

Mr Brough said yesterday that the From Hand Out to Hand Up report had been commissioned in late 2005.

"Implementation of aspects of the report require Queensland Government legislation and Premier Beattie has indicated his support for the report's proposals. To suggest the Australian Government was acting in an election context implies we were colluding with the Queensland Labor Government for electoral purposes, which is just ridiculous," he said.

Mr Pearson said yesterday that his reporting so far had not included details of

community consultations because they were being prepared for a September report.

Mr Martin was "a very perceptive, very intelligent bloke", he said, who had been fantastic in engaging the Aurukun community.

"People like Philip probably feel they have done some very valuable work. But we're not writing a PhD here. We are putting together a report that seeks government support, and we have got that."

He said government involvement had not jeopardised the quality of the trial. "We're here to take advantage of an opportunity. We'd be idiots if we didn't do that. Of course we have to take into account changing political conditions."