
What's being done to save Cape York's troubled communities?

Leisa Scott , *The Courier-Mail*
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Denzel Yunkaporta, 16. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

DENZEL Yunkaporta lopes through the doorway with an easy stride, almost managing to get his lanky frame into his bedroom without being spotted. Almost. "Hey, come here, please," Rick Hanlon calls after him. The 16-year-old turns and does as instructed. "Introduce yourself before you sit down," Hanlon says. "Hi, I'm Denzel," he says, extending a hand.

He's a Wik lad, a descendant of the Aboriginal people who repelled the randy sailors of the *Duyfken* from Cape York in the 17th century, saving us all from wearing clogs. His home is on the west coast of the Cape, a stunning, remote place isolated by the crisscrossing of extensive river systems and wetlands bigger than the Northern Territory's Kakadu. Yunkaporta is not at home in Aurukun, though, but about 800km away in Cairns, a boarder at AFL Cape York House while he goes to high school in the tourist city.

Except he didn't turn up to his school-based vocational training today and Hanlon, the House's program manager, wants to know why. "Slept. L Block," Yunkaporta mumbles. Hanlon nods, says they'll talk later.

Hanlon knows this "most beautiful young man" has been unsettled lately. A lot has been happening at home in Aurukun, a volatile place where years of substance abuse, inter-clan tension and appalling job prospects have combined to create high levels of violence, sexual assault and welfare dependency.

It was Yunkaporta's teenage mates back home who started the May fracas that resulted in teachers being flown out and politicians swooping in. His aunty, Phyllis Yunkaporta, 52, was attacked for speaking out about the violence. Then, a few days ago, Yunkaporta's 13-year-old "cousin-brother" decided he could not handle boarding at AFL House and returned to Aurukun. Now, Yunkaporta's thoughts keep straying home.

THE Cape is home to 18,000 people, about 60 per cent of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It's tough country; stunning but wild and dangerous. With more roads being built to open it up and mineral deposits unearthed, its potential for development – and job opportunities – is slowly being tapped. Now, though, real work is limited in many communities, meaning a heavy reliance on government money.

Mention the Cape and welfare and one name comes up: Noel Pearson. Raised in the Cape Aboriginal community of Hope Vale, Pearson was like Yunkaporta – sent away for high school, boarding at St Peters Lutheran College in Brisbane. He thrived in the academic environment and has become an influential Aboriginal intellectual. A prophet even, according to former prime minister Tony Abbott.

But he's a divisive character among indigenous people. In 2014, the left-leaning news site New Matilda, which has a strong emphasis on Aboriginal affairs, adapted a Monty Python favourite to headline a Pearson-related story, "He's not the Messiah, he's a very haughty boy".

His sway on the Cape is strong, largely due to his political nous. Back in the '90s, he co-founded the Cape York Land Council and has since moved on to develop a swag of Cape York businesses, which critics say wield too much power.

Griffith University academic Dr Marcus Woolombi Waters says Pearson filled the vacuum left by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, abolished in 2005 after both major parties decided it had not worked. This remains contentious.

After becoming a vocal critic of “passive welfare” and gaining the ear of the Howard government, Pearson’s Cape York Institute and Cape York Partnership (CYP) got the go-ahead in 2007 to establish the Cape York Welfare Reforms in Hope Vale, Coen and Mossman Gorge on the more accessible east coast and Aurukun on the west.

Since then, about \$200 million of federal and state government funding has gone into the reforms in four communities with a combined population of less than 3000. (CYP argues much of this funding is for existing services, such as Centrelink income management, and for the 2104-15 year \$4.7 million went to Pearson organisations.)

Then Aurukun blew up. Blame went around: police for not cracking down on violence, parents for letting kids run amok, the reforms for failing to be reformative and the town’s school, the Cape York Academy, another Pearson initiative, for closing down Years 7 to 10 two years ago, leaving about 80 kids of high-school age in Aurukun with little to do.

The fallout has emboldened Pearson’s critics and brought a sharper focus to the Cape and its custodians. Can tough love on welfare payments work without jobs? And what is the future for kids such as Denzel Yunkaporta and his 13-year-old cousin-brother as they straddle two worlds and try not to fall into the abyss?



Roy Gibson. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

IT’S not easy to get ahead as an Aborigine, says Roy Gibson, sitting in the cafe of the Mossman Gorge Centre he helped make happen. Your own mob will try to pull you down, he says. “Like crabs in a bucket.”

The 59-year-old curls up his hand – rough from years of manual work in the cane fields of Mossman, 75km north of Cairns – to represent a crab and then pulls it back with his other hand. “You can never get up there, stay down here with the rest of us.”

Gibson is a Kuku Yalanji man, from east coast country ranging up to Cooktown and inland to Chillagoe. He’s the vice-chairman of Bamanga Bubu Ngadimunku Inc (BBNI), the advocacy group for Mossman Gorge, an Aboriginal community of about 100 people where Gibson has lived most of his life. His affinity with the Gorge – and his friendship with a local farmer, the late Barry Murday, who sold a slab of land to the Indigenous Land Corporation for the centre at Gibson’s request – has led to a successful indigenous business in the heart of the World Heritage-listed Daintree rainforest that employs close to 100 people (90 per cent indigenous) and pulls in about 300,000 visitors annually.

Its success is being hailed nationally as a blueprint for other indigenous tourism opportunities. But Gibson says jealousy from some of his people over its success has been an issue. “Lateral violence,” offers Rachel Hodges, the centre’s assistant general manager and an indigenous woman. It’s a sociological term for the way minorities that feel powerless or have suffered oppression, particularly Aboriginal people, turn on each other with gossip, shaming and backstabbing.

Gibson says that all his life, he’d been warned against getting ahead, told not to be a “skiter” or “booroonboi”. However, having parlayed his love of the Gorge into a tourism outfit that has harnessed previously free-range visitors and made them pay, he’s undeterred. “I feel proud every day, but we get headaches every day,” Gibson says. “When you’re working with your mob, you’ve got to pull them along. You got to say, ‘Come on, we’re not finished yet, we’ve got a long way to finish’.”

Enters Hodges: “You’re effectively trying to change many years of people being caught up in the welfare trap and trying to change people’s work ethics.” She is noticing a shift in attitudes to work, with horizons broadening from work-for-the-dole to seeking a job as a guide or hospitality worker at the centre. The fact that Pearson’s welfare reforms dovetailed with the centre’s opening “was the best thing that ever happened”. “The family income management (of the reforms) has been good, that alongside this has really contributed to big differences,” she says. “When we first opened we had about 20 staff reliant on our shuttle bus to get them to and from work, now it’s four, a big change in the way people are managing money.”

Gibson leads us into the rainforest, pointing out critters and plants as we go. He tells how the giant boulders that fill this haven are the eggs that the Rainbow Serpent left

before heading to the coast and diving under the water, making the Great Barrier Reef. Leaning against a boulder by the rain-swollen Mossman River, he muses that his community is starting to get ahead. “This is a role model we’ve got here,” he says. “All my life is trying to have a better community for my people.” Have Pearson’s reforms helped in that? “He sort of give us some direction how we can lift ourselves up and get in a better place. To me, I see a lot of good, positive stuff that comes out.”



Vanessa Cannon (right) and art worker at Yalanji Arts-Centre at Mosman Gorge with Sheryl Burchill, the art centre manager. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

He returns us to Yalanji Art Centre, the artists’ workshop in the community, the precursor of which was a shed making souvenirs that Gibson got going in the ’80s. It’s an impressive space, relaunched earlier this year after a refurbishment by Bama Services, another CYP business. Manager Sheryl Burchill says artwork such as pottery pinch cups are sold to Sydney-based stationery and design company Corban & Blair but with 2.2 million tourists annually in the Daintree/Port Douglas region and the opening of the Mossman Gorge Centre’s gallery, the market mostly comes to the Yalanji artists.

“To come from a shed to having this business now and bringing money back into the community is fantastic,” Burchill says. “From what I’ve seen in the last 10 years, there’s been a huge change and it’s been great for our mob. I think a lot more people in the community could do a lot more for themselves but you know that saying, you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink.”

Inside, Vanessa Cannon is guzzling up the opportunities, lost in her work as she carves away at a clay vase, which, when finished, will boast one of her screen prints. Her inspiration is right outside the door. “Ideas? In the rainforest. You just go out and take a walk.”



Fashion Designer Grace Lillian Lee assisting at a fashion shoot featuring models Saisha Schonenberger and Samaria Denman on the banks of the Mossman River. Holding the studio light is Sheryl Burchill. .Picture: Russell Shakespeare

The screen-printed fabric and fashion designs by Cannon and her brother, Demilio Denman, 22, were on show at the Cairns Indigenous Arts Fair fashion show last night. This is Cannon's third year at CIAF and she feels proud when indigenous models are up on stage in her dresses, celebrating their heritage. Models such as Saisha Schonenberger and Samaria Denman (Demilio's niece), both 17, who have just walked through the door from Mossman High School to strike a pose for Grace - Lillian Lee. Lee, 27, is a fashion designer who studied at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and became an assistant designer with jeweller Mimco - before returning to far north Queensland. Of Torres Strait Islander and Chinese ancestry, she now designs wearable art and is the curator for CIAF's fashion show, scouting for indigenous models as far north as Mornington Island, in the Gulf of Carpentaria, where she runs regular workshops.

"Some of these girls have never worn dresses," she says. "Girls and guys just feel so good when we're nurturing and giving them time and celebrating who they are and adorning them with pieces that are relative to their lineage."

Now it's Schonenberger and Denman's turn to be adorned by Lee. Burchill goes to the community nursery to pluck some blooms and foliage as the girls pull on dresses and bracelets designed by Yalanji people. There's chat about Schonenberger's move next year to Switzerland, where her father is from, and Denman's plan to study midwifery at university. In bare feet, the models – Kuku Yalanji, who live outside the

community – pad down to the river’s edge, followed by Lee and Burchill. There are giggles as the girls negotiate slippery rocks to get down near the water for the shot. They’re confident, funny and excited by the looming adventure of adulthood. When the camera clicks, their gaze is strong and steady.



Bruce Martin. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

BRUCE Martin has known Noel Pearson for years. He has no doubt Pearson wants to see change for the better in Aurukun. But Martin insists Pearson has got it wrong with the Cape York Welfare Reforms. “It doesn’t matter how good Noel’s intentions were, we have to look at the evidence and say, what has resulted over the last decade of welfare reform?” says Martin. “What’s happened ... is people are hurting, they have been disempowered and disenfranchised and they have been sidelined.”

Martin is the son of Wik woman, Dorothy Pootchemunka, and anthropologist David Martin, who lived with the Wik for close to a decade in the '70s. The 32-year-old was educated in Canberra but returned to Aurukun for holidays, speaks Wik-Mungkan and says, “I’m as comfortable in a grass skirt my mum’s made me, performing ceremony, as I am in a suit and tie in a boardroom”. He now lives in Weipa where he has bought a civil construction business that employs indigenous workers and helped set up APN (Aak Puul Ngantam) Cape York, an initiative of four of the five

Wik clans aimed at improving connection to culture and jobs, including work as stockmen.

He knows the history of Aurukun well – how it began as a Presbyterian mission in 1904; how Wik moved between the mission and their tribal grounds for decades, holding on to culture; how bauxite discoveries made it popular with government, leading to the Bjelke-Petersen government assuming control of Aurukun in 1978. He knows about the court cases his people fought, the battle in London's Privy Council, the landmark Wik native title case.

He's also well aware that booze is a huge problem in his community, with the first "pub" imposed by the Queensland government as a money-raising venture in 1985 and now, sly grog brought into the dry community, often by his own people. He knows the place his father saw in the '70s is vastly different now, with alcohol and marijuana abuse rife, connection to country lost in a haze of addiction and lack of purpose.

Martin says that far from halting Aurukun's problems, Pearson's reforms made things worse. He says as upsetting as it was that young Aurukun men became violent and forced teachers to flee, their revolt had allowed the opinions of Aboriginals other than Pearson to be heard. "If that hadn't occurred, we wouldn't be having this conversation ... A string of incidents have forced governments to actually look at what's going on and ask themselves the question: Is the investment we're making providing a return?"

Martin says for too long, particularly under former prime minister Tony Abbott, Pearson had a stranglehold over government decisions while Wik people were ignored. This was the case even when Martin took a seat on the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, where he argued that the community needed deeper involvement in decision-making. "I'm listened to, but senior bureaucrats say ... 'Have you talked to Noel about it?' " (Former state indigenous affairs minister Glen Elmes tells me that in 2013, when he decided not to continue funding the ongoing reform trial, he took an abusive phone call from Pearson after which "I had to find a dictionary and look the words up". The trial was reinstated the next day with more money, and it is said Pearson called either Abbott or a senior federal public servant to put pressure on then-premier Campbell Newman. I put that to Elmes, who says he was out of phone range that day. So, did he come back into range and his decision was reversed? "That's pretty much it, yes.")



Cape York Academy Co-Chair Noel Pearson. Picture: Darren England.

I mention that Mossman Gorge appears to be doing well under the reforms. Martin bristles, says the corollary of that is, “So it’s Aurukun’s fault.” There’s no comparison, he says. Mossman Gorge is in a small regional town on a busy tourist highway, with one of the country’s best-heeled tourist resorts, Port Douglas, 22km away and Cairns a further 55km south. In contrast, the drive to Aurukun from Cairns takes about 12 hours, and there are more than 1000 extra people there but much less work. Mossman Gorge has access to a Year 12 high school and a range of jobs, and importantly, the Mossman Gorge Centre, which instils pride in local Aboriginals. “I think it’s misleading to say it’s welfare reform that’s driven change in that community,” he says.

It’s disingenuous to suggest the Wik were consulted about the reforms, too, says Martin. He points to articles by Philip Martin (no relation), a CYP consultant on the reforms in Aurukun in 2007 who resigned after six months, saying the project was a “sham” with a veneer of consultation, inappropriately rushed to meet a deadline for the federal budget. Contacted in London where he works for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Martin maintains, “the process was unethical, unrepresentative and fulfilled all of the criteria of ‘bad development practice’ ”.

Tim Jaffer, who led the project, insists it had rigorous design and real consultation but Philip Martin had wanted to operate outside the structured process. It was not rushed for the budget but “we were very wary that it wasn’t an open-ended process”. Bruce Martin tells a story he says is indicative of “consultation”. When the Cape York

Academy came into the community, it suggested spearmaking lessons. Elders were keen, turned up to meetings. But instead of using the knowledge on tap, a Sri Lankan man in CYP's office Googled the topic and developed the lesson. A variety of other slights meant many locals disengaged from reform programs, unwilling to submit to something over which they had no input. "It's the quintessential Aboriginal way, disengagement. If you're not going to even listen to us, then we're going to actively disengage."



Training at AFL House. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

FIONA Jose, CYP's general manager, reckons "Bruce Martin is wrong", saying Aurukun's culture program is sophisticated and unique. She did not address directly the case of the spearmaking lessons. Martin says the biggest problem with the reforms in Aurukun was that while there were punitive measures to reduce passive welfare, the CYP failed to deliver jobs or skill people up. "The greatest reformer of welfare is jobs," he says. "We have a \$2.6 billion program 40km north of Aurukun in Rio Tinto's Amrun project, 1500 jobs at the peak sometime next year. If CYP were doing their job, you would have a cohort of Wik people ready to get into those opportunities ... (Instead) they had an adversarial relationship with community ... if you don't fit into these confines of what we see as success, then you don't fit in at all."



Model Saisha Schonenberger. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

What needs to happen in Aurukun is for the Wik to get their voice back, says Martin. He says a community body, separate from the shire council and Ngan Aak-Kunch (NAK), Aurukun's native title body, should be set up to direct the provision of social, education, job, health, youth, language and culture services. "If community has ownership of it, they will drive it and if you're a service provider or government delivering education or health, you are ultimately accountable to the community. These organisations that historically received huge amounts of money on behalf of Wik people, they need to be accountable to Wik people."

There's another big move he'd like to see. He thinks NAK should break away from the Cape York Land Council, the Cape's overarching native title body, headed by Richie Ah Mat, a close Pearson ally. (It's a busy space; a rival organisation to CYLC, Cape York Alliance, started up last year and called on state and federal attorneys-general to investigate the CYLC and a number of Pearson-related organisations. The alliance is angered by the CYLC's controversial One Claim, Australia's largest native title claim over 14.6 million hectares of unclaimed land and inland waters of Cape York. It cites poor consultation, a claim rejected by the CYLC).

NAK and the CYLC separated briefly last year but Martin says NAK directors were flown to Cairns and signed back up. Underlying tensions remain. With bauxite mining

a hot issue – most notably, the messy case of the right to mine the \$20 billion Aurukun bauxite deposit, which has been awarded to Glencore but is being challenged by Aurukun Bauxite Developments (ABD) in the courts – Martin says it's time for Wik people to take control. "Whoever the developer is in the future, if NAK stand on their own two feet they can drive the agenda for Wik native title holders rather than it be brokered through someone else."

Pearson agreed to an interview but cancelled and substituted Fiona Jose. Jose says reskilling and training opportunities have been restricted in Aurukun by the failure of ABD (with which NAK had a joint venture) to win preferred developer status of the bauxite deposit. Still, of 223 Aurukun people on work-for-the-dole, 60 had upgraded their literacy and numeracy skills and 50 had received driver's licences.

"To say we're not preparing, not right, to say it's slow progress, I'd have to agree, yes, it absolutely is," she says. It was a long process to upskill Aurukun people to meet the "baseline" employment requirements of mining companies.

Jose said because of the changes in Australia's political leadership over the past three years, the reforms have not moved from trial status and "we haven't had authority to change what's needed to change on the ground". While three other CYWR communities were moving towards the Empowered Communities model in which local leaders make decisions and CYP support them, Aurukun's mayor, Dereck Walpo, had not engaged with the process. Rather than CYP force the issue in an already "political" situation, Jose said it was up to federal and state governments to help Aurukun move forward. "There are absolutely more challenges in Aurukun (than other reform communities)," Jose said.



Valerie Williams. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

VAL Williams's eyes sparkle as she tells of watching Noel Pearson deliver a 20-minute speech, in verse, to open CYP's new Cairns building in June. "I usually get bored when people talk too long but when he started speaking in the poetic style, about the past, the leaders, what they've done, what they've been through, it was very inspiring," she says.

Williams, 25, has been alive as long as Pearson has been politically active and programs developed by CYP have been touchstones of her life. In Year 9, the girl from Bamaga on the tip of the Cape boarded at Brisbane's Lourdes Hill College as part of the Academic Leaders program. She admits she found the rules too strict in Year 11 and returned home to finish school and work. But when a cousin mentioned CYP's Youth Leaders program to her – with the opportunity to go to Cairns to learn public speaking and persuasion techniques – she was keen to sign up.

She's now part of Skilling Leaders, studying project management at TAFE while learning on-the-job with CYP's landscaping and construction business, Bama Services, which employs 51 people and is currently working on Munro Martin Parklands in Cairns. Williams hopes to return to Bamaga to help her father in his transport and construction business. She knows many indigenous people don't like Pearson but she's a convert.

"Being a part of the Leaders Program and now working here, it's broadened my mind to see what he's about, that's why I can't agree with anyone who goes against him. I'm part of his team. His thinking is obviously broader than other people. He's not scared. He will argue with people, he will get his way. Some people can't, that's probably why they don't like him."

IT'S a bit drizzly, so training has moved undercover to AFL Cape York House's new basketball courts, where dozens of young men are practising drills. Gaining a place at the House does not hinge on AFL ability – "We've got kids here who can't kick," says Hanlon – but physical activity is expected. Denzel Yunkaporta is in the thick of it, handballing to his mates.

Hanlon moved to Cairns from Tasmania in 1998 as a development manager with AFL Queensland, heading regularly to the Cape to scout for talent. It was meant to be for two years. The physical beauty of the far north and the people made him stay. "You meet these magnificent kids, really beautiful young people who need a break."



Training in the undercover area at AFL House. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

AFL Cape York House feeds and houses about 40 boys, helping them adjust to life away from home, while they attend one of seven partner schools in Cairns. There's an in-house education specialist who oversees study sessions and assessments, while a career manager guides the boys towards their talent areas. A weekly meeting tracks how each boy is developing. Since opening its doors in 2013 after securing funding from the federal and state governments and the AFL, 12 boys have graduated and six of those are at university. The House is not connected to CYP's Academic Leaders program. "We don't have a relationship with Pearson," says Hanlon.

It's emotionally draining work, he says, but worth it. "Kids can put you on a high, really kick some goals, and then the next minute, another kid hits the wall. It's like a bubbling volcano just waiting to erupt. If you were to say to me, 'Oh, you wouldn't have problems with drugs here,' you're kidding yourself. Of course we do, and alcohol, kids jumping out of windows. I'm sick of organisations that try to make out that a negative thing never goes on. People just tell lies in this space, education outcomes, attendance. People make up a lot of junk."

Hanlon believes communities need to receive expert help for trauma caused by alcohol abuse, sexual, domestic and inter-clan violence. "Unless you can cope, how do you make good decisions?" But he says it's the local people – with support from outside agencies – who need to be given charge of, and take responsibility for, what goes on in their town. "That's not an easy task," he says, but imposing programs

does not work. “I’ve seen a lot of fly-in, fly-out advice and over a long period of time, people in the communities just think, ‘Oh, here’s just another person coming in and telling us what to do,’” he says. “It’s failing them.”



Designer Grace Lillian Lee doing hair and makeup for model Samaria Denman. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

The same is being said, louder and louder, about the controversial Northern Territory intervention in place since 2007, also backed by Pearson. Monash University’s Castan Centre released a report in February, which found the intervention has failed to deliver substantial reform in welfare, health, housing, employment and prison rates. When the Closing the Gap report was released a couple of days later, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull conceded much more work needed to be done and he and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten talked of a new relationship in which the views of indigenous people are keenly heard.

To that end, the comprehensive Redfern Statement was released during the federal election campaign. Led by the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples, the statement pointed out its deep concern “that federal government policies continue to be made for and to, rather than with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”. It wants that changed. It also wants the \$534 million cut from indigenous affairs in the 2014 Budget restored, including funding for the Congress.



Model Samaria Denman. Picture: Russell Shakespeare

With the federal Parliament weeks away from settling down, Aboriginal affairs policy is in limbo. The May 2017 timetable for a referendum on constitutional recognition of indigenous people looks likely to be pushed further out, and calls for a more far-reaching treaty are gaining ground. In Queensland, the Palaszczuk Government says it will have a whole-of-government plan to improve the lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by the end of the year.

And last week, it served up an embarrassing smackdown to Pearson's vision. The Education Department will assume greater control of schooling in Aurukun after its - review of the Cape York Academy and the controversial teaching method, Direct Instruction. While DI will remain, the Australian curriculum will be followed more closely and teaching of the Wik language and culture emphasised. An audit of academy finances will be done. Years 7 and 8 will be reinstated, meaning Yunkaporta's cousin-brother can continue school at Aurukun.

I take a walk with Yunkaporta around the oval, his long strides forcing me to move at double pace. He talks about his love of AFL, "marking, kicking, tackling". I ask him what he wants to do when he graduates. "Go back home and stay there for a while, maybe get some job. Construction." So you like it in Aurukun? "Yeah, it's all right for me. Like, that's where I'm from. I like the little community."

It's where he's from. Home. In a couple of years, he'll be back there, on the wild western Cape. Whether he falls into that abyss of hopelessness will depend, in part, on policies implemented now.

Real collaboration with the people who live there, the people who call it home, must surely be a good start.