PRESENTS A GOLD LEADERSHIP PAPER

OUR RIGHT TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Noel Pearson
Team Leader, Cape York Partnerships

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FOREWORD

At IPAA Victoria we devote a great deal of time and energy to debating and discussing the key issues of public policy. In recent times, we have looked at community capacity building; strategies for inter agency collaboration; some of the practices and principles that underpin our parliamentary democracy; and issues of corporate governance and contemporary frameworks for regulation.

From time to time, however, issues arise which are of such complexity and such importance that they touch not only our commitment to public administration and democracy but also the very core of what makes us human. The continuing disadvantage endured by indigenous Australians is one such issue, as we struggle as a nation to come to grips with both a moral and practical meaning for reconciliation and to give effect to our intentions to improve the scandalously low outcomes for so many Aboriginal Australians in education and health.

In this Gold Leadership paper, Noel Pearson, team leader of Cape York Partnerships presents his view of the policy mistakes we are making and of the approaches we need to take. Noel challenges many of our most dearly held beliefs and confronts us with the consequences of decisions made with the best of intentions but based on a deeply flawed understanding of the issues. Noel’s views on passive welfare dependency and substance abuse are confronting, but the actions he and his colleagues are taking in Cape York to tackle the issues offer a powerful template for action elsewhere in Australia.

On behalf of IPAA Victoria, I wish to thank Noel for providing this paper and for allowing the Institute to publish it.

Peter Harmsworth
President, IPAA Victoria
INTRODUCTION

I contend that our first and foremost challenge in addressing the issues facing indigenous people in Australia is a challenge about thinking. It’s not just about action and implementation and service delivery and so on. Our first starting point must be to face up to the fact that, after 30 years and 3 decades of considerable investment and commitment by the Australian people to the position of indigenous peoples, we have not really made much progress.

In fact, if we look at the score card, we will find that, despite very significant material improvement in indigenous Australia, there has been a corresponding decline in the social quality of life in our communities. So our material life has gone upwards while the social quality of life in remote Australia has gone downwards. We cannot continue in the same direction without having a fundamental rethink about what we are doing.

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I will give you one example. It is now 10 years since the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Deaths in Custody delivered over 300 recommendations after an exhaustive national process of enquiry and consideration. 10 years later, there are more than 2,000 extra indigenous peoples in custody than at the time the report came out. What could possibly be the explanation for this disaster? How is it that a nation could spend so much money, so much time, so much political and policy focus and the situation deteriorate so egregiously? Yet we take no dramatic action, we don’t even pause to reconsider the policies we’re pursuing.

What possible explanations could there be for the fact that we have gone from something like 2,500 people custody to over 4,000 people in custody? We could say that not enough money was spent. But $400m was spent in pursuit of the Royal Commission’s recommendations and, while it can be argued that amount wasn’t enough, we must all concede that considerable sums of money were spent. Has not enough time elapsed since those recommendations were made? It has been 10 years, surely time enough for us to start to see some progress. Has there been insufficient will on the part of Governments to implement the recommendations? That is probably a proper enough assertion to make but is it a full explanation as to why our engagement in the criminal justice system has grown so considerably in this period?
THE NEED FOR NEW APPROACHES

In my view, our thinking was wrong in the Royal Commission’s original understanding of our predicament. The Royal Commission’s allegation, that we needed to understand all of the “underlying issues” driving Aboriginal engagement in the criminal justice system, really failed to confront honestly some of the plain facts about the engagement of our people in Cape York in the jails of North Queensland. We failed to confront substance abuse as a critical cause. Every month, the court lists in any aboriginal community in the Cape are almost 100% filled with cases that involve some kind of alcohol related incident and the Royal Commission failed to bring out, in stark relief, that obvious factor amongst all the other appropriate and correct factors, such as poor housing, unemployment, lack of training and so on. These ‘underlying issues’ are no doubt important factors for us to understand and to make a commitment towards addressing, but when we intellectually and strategically fail to confront the nose at the front of our face, and that is the outrageous incidence of violence occasioned by intoxication, then we fail to think properly about people’s predicaments and we fail to produce the strategies and policies necessary for us to truly tackle these problems.

So our first exercise in Cape York has been to go back and do some thinking about the nature of our challenge, the nature of our predicament and in that analysis we understand that there are ‘underlying issues’ and there is ‘a whole array of social and economic factors that give rise to suffering and disadvantage.’ But at the same time, we can’t just say that there are factors and there are factors and there are factors. In order to tackle the problem and move forward, we have got to be strategic about those things we need to first do in order to get on top of the problems, so that we can move on to the second generation of challenges. In Cape York, we have identified two questions of utmost urgency: the need for our people to get out of passive welfare dependency and to confront the substance abuse epidemics that rage amongst our people.

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THE RIGHTS AGENDA

Before I give you some outline of the change of outlook we are debating and thinking through in Cape York, let me turn to the question of indigenous rights. There has been a lot of suspicion and some allegation on the part of people from the left side of politics that I have abandoned the rights agenda. The public record is pretty clear that I am an unequivocal supporter of Aboriginal rights and I believe that the Aboriginal rights agenda is as important as the responsibility agenda.

If we are going to talk about reconciliation as a people then the foundation for reconciliation must be Mabo and the High Court’s decision to recognise the truth of our history and the entitlement and the special place of our people as the original owners of this country. 10 years after the Mabo decision, we as a country have failed to embrace the opportunity that decision provided to us. The three pillars of Native title law in Australia are that the white fellows keep their title, the black fellows are supposed to be entitled to what’s left over and in relation to certain categories of land such as national parks and pastoral leases where the two forms of title, the Crown title and the Native title, coexist, the white title prevails over the black title.

Who could argue against the correctness and the urgency and the importance of us delivering on those remnant titles as efficiently and as expeditiously as possible and with good grace? But we have failed to do that. Indigenous people have been faced with grudging opposition to the notion that the Aboriginal people should be entitled to what is left over under the Mabo compromise. So our rights agenda and our rights fight are far from over and if non-Aboriginal Australia is going to be serious about reconciliation as more than an abstract concept or a ‘feel good’ concept to be honoured in a pleasant stroll across the bridges of Sydney Harbour, then it is going to have to confront the fact that land justice is the foundation stone upon which any true reconciliation can ever be effective and our fight in Cape York continues unabated and without equivocation in relation to the importance of Mabo as a historical opportunity.

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THE RIGHT TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Our first guiding principle in relation to what we are trying to do in the Cape is that we have a right to take responsibility. We don’t believe that self-determination is simply a theoretical and political or legal right that can be handed on a plate to peoples and represent their salvation. I heard the indigenous premier of Greenland speak to us back in 1994 in Cairns and he most eloquently captured the true meaning of self-determination when he said self-determination is the right to take responsibility. Self-determination is hard work. It’s not some utopian formula that can be handed on a silver platter by the United Nations or under some kind of convention, it is actually the practical business of taking charge and taking back responsibility.

It is hard work but we have to get on top of our predicaments economically, socially, politically. It is a matter of us taking charge. These things are not just delivered by governments, they are assumed by people who take charge of their lives and take responsibility for their own people and for their own direction. So the true meaning of self-determination is not just a rights based thing, it is a responsibility based thing. It is the right to take responsibility at its very core and we join with many aboriginal people who say that we need to take responsibility for our lives and for our future. That does mean rethinking our relationship with government because even as we have become more passive and more dependent, the government has become more active and involved in our lives.

Government has got to retreat quite significantly. Government has got to give us the space to take responsibility. If, however, you think that the business of taking back responsibility is something that there’s great concurrence and support about among the Aboriginal leadership in the community, you are wrong. It is a struggle for jurisdiction, it is a struggle for space, it is a struggle about who is primarily responsible for action. In our view, government has got to be the junior partner in any endeavour to forge a new direction. Government can enable and support but it must understand that it can only be and that it can only ever be a junior partner in our decision as a people to climb out of our problems.

Government has a very important role in providing support and working with us in relation to strategies and policies and the legislative framework for our community, but governments generally fail to understand that man cannot live by service delivery alone. Service delivery is an important part of the equation but it is a very limited part of the need that we have. We need our people to take charge of our own problems and not see Government as the deliverer of all of the solutions.

In Cape York, I have been railing against a program administered by the Department of Health called ‘Life Promotion’. Really, when you start to have programs sponsored by the Government in which bureaucrats are paid and given a vehicle, an office and a fax machine to go around promoting life, then the next step seems to me to be a breathing promotion program. This example shows that the business of us taking back responsibility for our lives does, and will mean, that we will have a struggle with government at appropriate junctures. It will be a struggle for control, it will be a struggle for responsibility and the keenest struggles will take place with those agencies that are most intimately involved in the lives of Aboriginal people. The renegotiation of our relationship with government and the retreat of service delivery so that we can develop maximum self-service is a challenge that those who work with Aboriginal communities will also have to confront.
RESPONSIBILITY AND RACISM

Our second nostrum is that while we must continue to fight racism, we must never let it be our disability and our burden. We have to continue to fight against it, we have to be vigilant against it, but we must not adopt the mindset that racism is an insoluble problem and let it debilitate us. The point to make here is that sometimes our supporters and those Australians with good will towards us are primary generators of a culture and an outlook that makes racism a disability for our people. The wider Australian culture generates this outlook of pity and places us in the position of being victims. This is not at all a strong outlook for our people and we must avoid internalising this idea that racism is something that is capable of defeating us. We have to find a resilience to withstand racism while not giving into it.

The next thing is that we have to fight victimisation and it is related to the point about racism. We have to fight victimisation because it is there: on the streets, in the shops, in the playgrounds, on the campuses, in the institutions. Our people do suffer victimisation and we have to resolutely have the attitude that we won’t be victims. Once again our struggle is most strenuously with those people in the wider culture who see us as victims and want to continue to promote an attitude and an outlook of victimisation and victimhood. We have to resist that. We can’t simply be pitied.

We can’t simply be seen as victims. Some of the worst policy prescriptions that we have to organise and prevail against are those that end with the phrase, ‘we must stop blaming the victims’. We must not let history become an overwhelming burden and an inhibitor against us in engaging for the future.

We have to maintain our identity as a people and our unique culture, our unique background, our unique languages, our unique experiences, but at the same time we must encourage individual excellence and achievement. Who am I to prescribe what is true Aboriginal aspiration? Why can’t an Aboriginal person be an expert in Russian literature or in the history of South America? Our people should be free to choose whatever their paths might be and whatever their talents and passions might lead them towards. How can we urge the continuation of a situation for disadvantaged peoples at the very bottom of society in the name of preserving their culture? Why is it that all of our political energies are directed towards preserving people’s right to live at the very bottom?

There is a fundamental philosophical outlook change that the left side of politics has yet to undergo. It is to understand that the interests of those on whose behalf the left purports to talk lie not in the perpetuation and justification of people residing at the bottom of Australian society, but they in fact have a greater entitlement and they have a greater expectation and we as a country should face up to a greater aspiration and a greater right on the part of disadvantaged people and that is the right to engage in the social and economic life of the country. It is a testament to how curiously twisted our political economy is that we have those who purport to defend the interests of marginalised peoples being the most aggressive backers of the perpetuation of disadvantage and passivity down at the bottom end. We don’t honestly and we don’t truthfully face up to the fact that disadvantaged communities need to get families organised, we need to banish substance abuse, we in fact need to get more organised than more advantaged sections of the Australian community.
FIGHTING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

This leads on to an absolute policy that we are pursuing in Cape York. We have to rebuild our social, cultural, spiritual and therefore legal intolerance of substance abuse. That is our policy in relation to alcohol and the abuse of illicit drugs. Our policy first and foremost is to rebuild intolerance. Our policy is based on the analysis of substance abuse, that it is not, as the progressives claim, a symptom of underlying problems. Substance abuse is not a symptom of underlying personal economic or social problems, substance abuse is a condition in its own right. It is a learned behaviour and the factors necessary for the growth of substance abuse in communities are firstly, the availability of the drug, secondly money to acquire the drug, thirdly time to use the drug, fourthly the example of drug use in the immediate environment and lastly a permissive social ideology in relation to the use of the drug.

Put these factors together and you have the ingredients necessary for the growth of a substance abuse epidemic. Availability, money, time, the example of use in the immediate environment and a permissive social ideology in relation to the use of the drug. All of these factors are present in our communities: money from passive welfare; time due to chronic unemployment; examples of substance abuse permeating the environment; and the permissively misguided policy of ‘harm minimisation’ in relation to substance abuse.

So all of these factors that are usually said to underpin the rise of substance abuse misunderstand the nature of substance abuse. I used to be a symptom theorist too, I must admit. I've said on television even that “well, we have to understand that grog is, you know, a symptom of other underlying problems”. Where did I get that nonsense from? That nonsense is a cultural nonsense, a kind of article of cultural fate and so, when it comes to substance abuse, we are like parrots just taking on these ideas without question. I have been struggling to find a label to characterise this thinking on the left. I’ve tried progressivist, I’ve tried progressivism and so on, but one colloquial phrase that best captures it, it is a kind of progressivist parrotism. A range of ideas that we have internalised and we don’t quite know where they have come from but they are like articles of faith particularly in relation to critical political economy questions.

It is a question about whether disadvantaged communities should be compounded in their disadvantage because of our failure as an elite to be honest and realistic about the policies necessary to help those communities get on top of those problems. It is a political economy question. Substance abuse is not a moral issue, it is not a health issue, it is a political issue about whether disadvantaged neighbourhoods should be drenched, should be drenched in substance abuse and whether their quality of life should continue to deteriorate while we run around the place saying that we shouldn’t be blaming the victims.

Indigenous people in different parts of the country have a responsibility to their own people to decide whether the policies that we have been following over the last 30 years are sufficient for our future. In Cape York we have taken the decision that in some fundamental respects those policies have been correct, to the extent that land rights and human rights gained greater recognition after the 1967 referendum, they were correct policies and we have made great gains.

'Substance abuse is not a symptom of underlying personal economic or social problems, substance abuse is a condition in its own right'
Other decisions made with the best of intentions have been difficult for us. One example is the equal wage decision for Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry in the 1960s. Sir John Kerr was counsel for the pastoralists and he wrote an article in the wake of the determination and explained that everybody, all of the parties to the equal wage case were conscious that the result of the equal wage decision would be a significant increase in unemployment in the settlements and on the Missions. Everybody understood, including counsel for the Commonwealth, that this would be a consequence of the decision. The Commonwealth Government's view was that the decision was right, almost regardless of the consequences but as people on the ground, living and working in and with our communities, we can never support a view, that being in a situation of passivity and dependency is the right policy. We have to question our own convictions in relation to what truly is in the interests of disadvantaged communities. Disadvantaged communities need to engage into the economy as a matter of urgency and we have to use all of our guile and wit and energy and passion in pursuit of that objective.

In the Cape, we are confronting the issues on three related fronts:

- Developing and implementing a policy of zero tolerance of substance abuse and the violence that so often comes with it, no matter whether the abuse involves legal substances like alcohol or petrol or illegal drugs like heroin or cocaine
- Replacing passive welfare with reciprocity, that is, trying to use welfare based income and support from other sources to facilitate greater control and autonomy for our people
- Seeking out and using the skills of white society to support the participation of indigenous people in the real economy.

The key concept in these three strategies is partnership. Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships (IEP) was established in 1999 and is working in Cape York to establish a template that can be applied across Aboriginal communities throughout Australia to break the cycle of passive welfare dependency. It is, in effect, a consortium of Aboriginal Australians, corporate leaders, philanthropic organisations and academics including Boston Consulting Group, Westpac, The Body Shop, Harvard Business School, RMIT School of Management, The Myer Foundation and the Australian Foundation of Young Australians.

Through the IEP, we already have some impressive runs on the board:

- The Family Income Management Scheme, facilitated by Westpac is enabling families and communities to plan their finances so they are able to pay the rent and other routine bills and save for necessities like fridges, cooking facilities, adequate food and clothing
- Business and financial planning, also facilitated by Westpac, is ensuring business proposals are put through hard nosed, private sector reality checks and improving them so that they have a realistic chance of success
- Successful entrepreneurs are working with communities on sustainable projects such as bee keeping, native food harvesting, tourism operations and arts and craft industries
- Boston Consulting is supporting IEP and Aboriginal communities to develop strategies for working with Federal and State governments to improve the effectiveness of program delivery and to focus on reciprocity rather than passive welfare.
CONCLUSION

In the end, it’s not about the Left and Right of politics or about class struggle. It’s about outcomes for Aboriginal people and their communities and if the welfare programs and the harm minimisation strategies have not delivered better outcomes then it’s time to look for things that will.

We must get rid of drugs from poor neighbourhoods and disadvantaged communities. We have challenges enough without suffering from substance abuse. If the middle classes want to be liberal in relation to substance abuse policy, we as grass roots people and leaders and advocates for disadvantaged communities, must insist on our own approach. The most helpful drug policy in my view for young people is being pursued in the more advantaged schools in this State. It is a policy of zero tolerance.

We must fight for a meritocracy in the future as we have had in the past. There is in Australia a working class meritocracy who have risen to great heights in the political, social and economic life of this state and this country. That meritocracy grew up in an Australia where families were functional, where parents knew work and there was no substance abuse. We must consider it an abdication of responsibility by those of us who benefited from that history, if we are now prescribing policies that are going to make it very hard for a kid to grow up in a working class family and become a Director General of a State Department or to become the head of an Australian Bank. It will be our abdication of responsibility that will see a situation where very few disadvantaged people are going to be able to rise up in the world. For indigenous people in Australia, the fight against substance abuse is a major part of the fight for us to be able to follow our dreams, to achieve our aspirations and to gain the economic and social mobility that is our right.
Noel Pearson
Team Leader, Cape York Partnerships

Noel Pearson works in a voluntary capacity as Team Leader of Cape York Partnerships, a project negotiated between the Queensland Government and Aboriginal leaders of Cape York.

Noel was born in Cooktown and grew up at Hope Vale, a Lutheran Mission on south-east Cape York Peninsula.

He is a history and law graduate from Sydney University.

He continues to work as an advisor to the Cape York Land Council and other indigenous organisations in Cape York.

Noel Pearson’s current work on Cape York Partnerships draws widely on his thoughts on breaking down ‘passive welfare dependency’ amongst Cape York Aboriginal people, by reinstating the rights of Aboriginal people to take responsibility for their lives.

Descriptions of these ideas can be found in Pearson’s’ recent monograph “Our Right to Take Responsibility” (self-published, 2000), as well as his “Light on the Hill Ben Chifley Memorial Lecture” (Bathurst, 2000) and his “Charles Perkins Memorial Oration” (Sydney University, 2001).

For further information about the Cape York Partnerships project and its underlying principles, please visit www.capeyorkpartnerships.com