
Pain but no gain for Aborigines in Pearson's posture

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Author: **PAT O'SHANE**

"Parasite" remark is a gross example of blaming the victim ...

AS a sociologist, Noel Pearson makes a great Hansonite. His comment that welfare turns Aborigines into "drunken parasites" reminds me of Frantz Fanon's writings in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967), where he describes the insidious alienating effects of colonialism on the black man who seeks education in the manners of the white man, who changes his speech patterns in an attempt to become more acceptable to the coloniser, who tries to ingratiate himself in a variety of ways.

Fanon notes that not only does that black man "no longer understand the dialect [of his own people]" but "above all he adopts a critical attitude toward his compatriots". "Confronted with the most trivial occurrence, he becomes an oracle. He is the one who knows. He betrays himself in his speech."

And so it is with Pearson. His utterances betray him to be a person who knows little, or cares less, for the history of blacks' experiences with whites in this country.

For all his lawyer's rhetoric during the native title legislation debates, his comprehension of the depth of dispossession suffered by generations of our people seems minute. His pronouncements seem hedged with an eye to the main chance, which he has publicly expressed as a desire to become a politician -one who apparently expects to be handed a seat without having to put in the hard yards.

There is nothing in what he has said recently that indicates his being informed by a profound understanding of our history, and in particular the level of dispossession (including loss of sense of self within the community and as individuals) suffered by our people.

The Macquarie Dictionary defines parasite as "one who lives on others or another without making any useful and fitting return, especially one who lives on the hospitality of others". "Hospitality" connotes that one is a guest or invited stranger in the home/hearth or community of others. Given the history of dispossession of our land, which continues as I write, Pearson's use of the word parasite is especially offensive.

There is no excusing someone such as Pearson, who is highly educated, who moves among the power elites of this country and who uses the language with great flourish.

He can hardly be said to be someone who doesn't know what he is talking about.

The fact that he said these things in the company of the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, who then encouraged him to go public with his views, simply compounds his sins; the

present Federal Government is the most anti-Aboriginal we've seen since the 1880s, when Australian governments put in place a ragbag of "protection" legislation to ensure our forebears were not completely exterminated.

Governments since that time have adopted a variety of policies towards Aborigines, including welfare policies. It must be remembered that these measures were implemented after people had been removed from their lands, shot and poisoned, had their children taken away, their languages condemned, their other cultural practices scorned and derided and they were left bereft.

WELFARE policies had a lot going for them, notwithstanding that in many respects their implementation led to disempowerment, thus rendering Aborigines (in common with many other recipients) as abject mendicants.

To refer to Aborigines, then, as parasites is a gross example of blaming the victim.

When I was permanent head of the NSW Aboriginal Affairs Department (1981-86), I was to be heard regularly decrying the disempowering effects of welfare policies and the fact people had been stultified by the dependency such policies breed. As one of the few people anywhere in Australia at the time to talk about the issue, I was constantly trying to develop an understanding in the minds of all Australians that if Aborigines were to become self-determining (in accordance with the catchcry of the day), then governments at all levels and their bureaucracies had to develop policies and programs that enabled our people to develop, maintain and practise certain skills.

That required clearly articulated, practically oriented programs of education and employment training. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, with the encouragement of the Wran Labor government, tried to do that and was successful in the endeavour. Almost nobody else listened to my warnings at the time.

Given the deleterious effects wrought on people by the uncritical application of welfare policies, clearly we need sharp and critical analyses of the policies, the manner in which they have been implemented over time, the benefits and the negative aspects.

The challenge for all of us who seek to build better communities in which members can participate fully and functionally is to improve upon the gains that have been made and to build on those. That is a far cry from what Pearson has said, let alone proposes.

Indeed, it is significant to note there was no positive proposal put forward in what he had to say. Some leader!

The Canberra contagion, perhaps? Was he simply grandstanding? Is there a hidden agenda -to wit, political ambitions -in relation to which he believes he must appeal to the same mindless, superficial and wilful ignorance that the Coalition and Labor forces in this country now wish to pander to?

Or was it some even meaner political opportunism? Whatever it was, he should know -and the reader should beware that he doesn't speak for us!

**** Dr Pat O'Shane is chancellor of the University of New England***